

BRAVE AND BOLD

A DIFFERENT COMPLETE STORY EVERY WEEK

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No. 203

NEW YORK, NOVEMBER 10, 1906.

Price, Five Cents



Into the air went Young Maverick and his horse, and down they plunged into the river with a tremendous splash.

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NEW YORK, November 10, 1906.

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Young Maverick, the Boy from Nowhere;

OR,

The Young Oil King of Texas.

By **SAM RUSHER.**

CHAPTER I.

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN.

"Where does this kid you're tellin' me about hail from?"

"Nowhere."

"What?"

"He says he hails from every place, and that's no place at all."

"What's his name?"

"He hasn't got any."

"Look here, Luke! Are you trying to josh me?"

"Not on your life, Scapps!"

"How can a boy get to be 16 or 18 years old and not have no name?"

"I should have said, I suppose, that he's got a name, but that he doesn't know what it is."

"How does that come, Larrimore?"

"You can search me! The letters 'L. M.' are tattooed on his left forearm, and the kid has fitted a couple of names to the letters."

"What name? That's what I'm tryin' to get at."

"He calls himself Lee Maverick."

"Maverick, eh? He's the kind of a maverick that's runnin' wild with a brand. Some 'un'll see him an' take him in one o' these days. But you ain't the kind to bother with a kid like that unless you got some kind of a job on, Luke Larrimore. Hustle up an' tell me what your game is. I've got these here steers purty nigh unloaded, an' they've got to be drove out to the ranch."

Four cars were standing on a side-track, near a cattle stockade, in the little Texas town of Boliver.

Three of the cars were box-cars—"empties"—and the fourth, which was shoved up to the chute of the stockade, was a cattle-car, and out of it a lot of steers were being coaxed and driven.

The cattle were about as wild as they well could be, and the four cowboys who were doing the unloading had their hands more than full.

The conversation which begins this chapter took place near the end of one of the box-cars.

The man called Luke Larrimore was of stocky build and flashy dress, and had an unscrupulous face and a pair of shifty eyes; the other, Scapps, wore a flannel shirt, a sombrero, a pair of buckskin "chaps," and possessed a countenance of as evil a cast as that of his companion.

Before Larrimore answered Scapps' last question he gave a swift look about him to make sure that he and his friend were quite alone.

"You're right," said Larrimore finally. "I wouldn't have taken the trouble to find out what I have about this kid from Nowhere if there hadn't been a prospect of money in it. And it's a fat prospect, Scapps."

Scapps began to show a deep interest.

"Cough it up, can't ye?" he queried as the other paused. "Don't be hangin' fire."

"As foreman for the Two-G outfit," went on Larrimore, "you rake in about fifty per, don't you, Scapps?"

"Sixty," corrected the foreman.

"I suppose you wouldn't like to make a hundred thousand or so, and enjoy life for the rest of your days?"

"Try me, that's all."

"Will you take chances?"

"What kind er chances?"

"The long kind."

"You don't mean to put this young Maverick out of the way, nor anythin' like that?"

"I haven't said so, have I?"

"No; but you're hintin' mighty strong."

"Well, suppose it did come to that? I'm not saying that it will, but supposing that it did? The boy is a stray, and nobody knows much about him, or cares. And don't forget—there's a fortune in it."

Scapps was silent for a moment; then he lifted his furtive gaze to Larrimore's face and said:

"I'd do a hull lot fer a hundred thousand, Luke."

"So would 'most anybody." Larrimore thrust out his hand, and the cattleman took it and gave it a shake. "Here's the idea: This young Maverick carries about in his clothes a legal document known as a contract for a deed."

"That means that when he pays a certain amount of money he's to get a deed to some property, hey?"

"Yes. In the present instance the property to be conveyed is 160 acres of Texas land."

"Good land?"

"No; poor—about the poorest quarter-section, from an agricultural and grazing standpoint, that old Bill Tetly owns."

"Then what in Sam Hill——"

"Wait. If that contract was out of the way I could buy that hundred and sixty from Tetly myself."

"What the blazes do you want with it?"

"Don't you worry. It will mean a fortune to me—and to you if you help me out."

"There can't be any gold under the land, 'kase this here ain't a gold country."

"There's something better than gold, Scapps."

"What?"

"I'll keep that to myself. I've tipped my hand to you, but I'm not going to give away all the points. When these steers are unloaded send them out to the Two-G Ranch, but you stay in town. Get the contract for the deed from young Maverick, bring it to me, and I'll tell you more and give you a writing entitling you to a half-interest in the deal."

There was a brief silence, and then Scapps cleared his throat and said:

"I've knowed you for a good while, Luke, and I never knowed you to tackle a proposition within gittin' dollars out of it. I'll get that contract, but you'll never get it away from me until I know more of your deal an' have my rights put down in black and white."

"That's business," returned Larrimore briskly.

"What does this young Maverick do for a livin'?"

"Anything that comes handy. For some time, though, he's been selling what he calls 'Maverick Magic Oil'——"

"Thunder! Why, I've got a bottle o' thet out to the ranch, an' it's sure the best thing for the rheumatism, or for a sprain, that any of the punchers ever tried."

"Did you ever smell of that oil?"

"I have, that. It's enough to knock a feller over."

"Well, it was the Magic Oil that put me on to this job. I followed young Maverick, found out where he got it, and——"

Larrimore happened to cast up his eyes, and instantly came to a pause, his words dying on his lips.

"What's the matter with ye?" asked Scapps.

"An eavesdropper!"

Larrimore pointed to the top of the car, and both men saw a face that looked as though it had been cut from a comic valentine.

It was the face of a boy, and had its Teutonic origin written in every feature.

Puffy cheeks, long, carrotty hair, blue eyes, and a mouth that was always at a grin were the principal items in the make-up.

The youth was lying down on the car top, looking over.

"How you vas, chentlemen?" inquired the Dutch youth.

"Confound you!" shouted Larrimore, starting angrily toward the car; "how long have you been there?"

"I haf been here seferal minids doo long for mein own goot, I can see dot so quick like anyding!"

As the boy spoke he got up on his feet. Viewed at full length, his resemblance to a comic valentine was even more pronounced.

A little, old-country cap was stuck on the back of his head, an abbreviated jacket clung about his shoulders, and his trousers were baggy, ill-fitting, and about six inches too short.

A section of rope was tied about his waist, and into this make-shift belt was thrust an old hatchet and a huge horse-pistol which might have seen service in the Revolution.

"Catch the Dutchman, Scapps!" cried Larrimore.

"I'll do it!" replied the cattleman, and started up the iron ladder at the end of the car.

"You vill, I don'd t'ink!" the boy flung back. "I'm der Flyin' Dutchman, oof you blease, und ven you ketch me you ketch some veasels ashleep!"

As Scapps jumped upon the roof of the box-car the boy started along it at a run and leaped to the second car, and then to the third, while Larrimore hurried along on the ground, to prevent him from climbing down.

The boy, who went by the name of Chris Augenblick, managed to finally elude his pursuers and made a search for Lee Maverick, who was pointed out to him.

"Come this way!" said Lee, after hearing a few sentences, and he took Chris by the arm and drew him a little farther up the street.

Between the two buildings on the left there was a small platform wagon.

No horse was hitched to the wagon, and there was a dry-goods-box behind the seat of the vehicle, covered with a gaudy Navajo blanket.

On the blanket were neatly piled tier after tier of bottles, each bearing a yellow wrapper.

A pretty young woman was sitting on the wagon-seat, and a warm light came into her wide blue eyes as they rested on young Maverick.

"Much obliged to you for watching the wagon for me, Kitty," said Lee, halting by the front wheel. "Shall I help you down?"

Kitty got up, reached out her hand and was swung lightly to the ground.

"It wasn't any trouble at all, Lee," she answered, "and I was glad to do it. I saw you pull the Dutch boy off the steer, and I thought for half a minute that you'd be knocked down and trampled on for your pains."

"It would take a pretty nimble steer to knock me off my pins, Kitty," laughed Lee. "Miss Shane, allow me to present Chris Augenblick."

"So glad as I can't tell," remarked Chris, with a bow.

"Don't mention it," returned Kitty, with a mischievous sparkle in her blue eyes; "next time you ride a broadhorn take my advice and face to the front."

"Next time I ride a broadhorn you 'bed my life I won't ride id at all! Vonce iss a great blenty, t'anks."

"I'm going home now, Lee," Kitty Shane added, turning to young Maverick. "When are you coming out to see Tetly again?"

"To-morrow, if nothing happens to prevent. I'm ready to close that deal, Kitty."

"Well, good-by till to-morrow, then."

The girl turned away and vanished around one of the buildings, and Lee and Chris climbed up on the seat of the wagon.

"Now, then," said Lee, "what is it you want to tell me?"

"You haf a contract for a deed in your pocket, yes?"

Lee flashed Chris a sharp look.

"How do you happen to know that?"

"Iss id righdt?" persisted Chris. "Oof id iss, look a leedle oudt. Dere's anodder feller vants id, und he's goin' to make some droubles."

"Tell me what you know and how you found it out," said Lee sharply.

Thereupon Chris unbosomed himself. He had a very good memory, and, as he had heard the entire conversation between Larrimore and Scapps, the information he had to give was reliable.

"I climbed to der top oof dot freight-car to dake a shleep in der sun," Chris added, when he had finished his story; "but ven dose cowpoys began unloading dose shteers id vaked me oop. Vile I vas laying dere dose fellers shtarted in to talk, und dot's how I got next to vat I peen telling you."

"You have done me a good turn, Chris," observed Lee, with a thoughtful look.

CHAPTER II.

THE TROUBLE BEGINS.

Chris laughed.

"Shall ve shoosk handts alretty?" Chris asked.

"Sure thing," replied Lee, and they shook hands on the spot.

"You're der poy from Novere, und I guess, py shinks, I come from der same blace! Dot makes us pards, ain'd id?"

"It ought to."

"Den you're my pard, und I'm your pard, und dot's all aboutd id?"

"We'll call it that way."

Chris was greatly pleased. The grin that split his chubby face grew broader and broader.

"I'm pooty oldt for my age, und bigger for my size dan vat you t'ink," he went on. "Meppy you vill need me ven dis feller Luke Larrimore und dot odder man, Scapps, try to do someding mit dot contract."

"I don't know Scapps," Lee answered, "and I can't remember ever meeting this Larrimore."

"Vell, looky here vonce, Lee. Iss dot land vort' all der bodder und der risk?"

"You bet it is!" and Lee brought down his clenched fist on his knee in a way that proved he meant what he said. "I'll hang onto that land as long as I'm able to breathe, and don't you forget it!"

"Dot's der vay I like to hear a feller talk. But I say, haf you seen a chob layin' aroundt loose any-vere?"

"What kind of a job do you want?"

"Someding at my trade."

"And what's your trade?"

"I'm a sailor on vone of dese air-ships. Oof you know of a flying-machine vat needs a goot feller to make up her crew I vill be mooch opliged oof you pud me next."

"I don't know of any flying-machine around here. Lee laughed; "but if you want to help me sell this stuff"—he waved his hand toward the bottles in the back of the wagon—"I guess we can do business. I'll give you half the profits."

"Vat iss id?"

"Maverick Magic Oil," replied Lee; "two-bits a bottle. I can rake in the coin for it as fast as I can hand it out."

"Ach, dot makes me remember someding. Larrimore saidt id vas dot Magic Oil vat made him t'ink of gedding dot contract away from you."

"Do you know why, Chris?" There was a strange light in young Maverick's eyes as he put the question.

"Nod being a mind-reader, I vill haf to pass id oop."

"Because I get that oil off that land I have bought."

"How vas dot?"

"There's a spring at one corner of the quarter-section; that oil comes out on top of the water in the spring. I spread out a blanket and skim off the oil, and then I squeeze out the blanket; see? I'm making the land pay for itself in that way."

"Dot's a pooty goot vay," returned Chris, with an admiring look at the young hustler beside him. "Luke Larrimore vants to go indo der oil pitzness, yes?"

"That's what he wants, but he doesn't want to bottle up the stuff and sell it out as I am doing."

"How vill he do id?"

"Can you keep a secret?"

"So fast like noddng."

"Then you'll understand everything when I tell you that my Magic Oil is nothing but crude petroleum—kerosene, you understand? I was tramping through the country and I saw the spring, found out it was on land belonging to Bill Tetly, and I hired out to Tetly and worked a couple of months and got a hundred dollars. Then I paid fifty of the hundred back to my employer and got this contract for a deed, and the understanding is that I'm to have a deed whenever I can make a payment of two hundred dollars; after that I'll give Tetly a mortgage for two hundred and fifty dollars and the land will belong to me."

"Und you t'ink id vill make you rich?"

"I'm positive of it! It will give me the means to locate myself, and to find out who I am and where I hail from—two things I have been trying to discover ever since I was old enough to know that I was a stray."

"Vat do you know aboutd yourseluf, anyvay? You must know a leedle someding."

"There's too much of it, Chris, and I can't take time to throw it into you now. What I'm trying to get at is

this: Larrimore's object is plain. He has caught onto what I am doing, and he wants to get this contract for a deed away from me, and make old Tetly a better offer than I have given him, and so freeze me out. But I wasn't born yesterday, if I am a little hazy about myself other ways. I'll give him a run for his auburn chip, see if I don't!" Young Maverick slapped at the top of his sombrero. "I've got three hundred dollars in there; every cent of it made off this Magic Oil, for the oil is good, and the people know it. I'm going to turn two hundred dollars over to Bill Tetly and get my deed, and have the deed put on record; then I can snap my fingers at Scapps and Larrimore."

"Vat you going to do mit der odder hundert toilers?"

"I've got Ab Grimes boring a hole on that land. People hereabouts think I'm digging an artesian well, but they're 'way off. I'm looking for oil, not water."

"Chiminy grickets!" exclaimed Chris Augenblick. "You're der smardest feller vat I've met in a mont' oof Suntays!"

"You go back and sit down, Chris!" smiled Lee. "I'm an American boy—I know that much about myself—and I'm proud of it. A fellow has got to have hustle and snap if he climbs to the top of the heap, and that's where I'm bound for. These initials on my arm stand for something besides Lee Maverick, and I'm going to find out what they mean."

Young Maverick drew up his left sleeve and pointed to the two letters "L. M." that were tattooed on his arm.

"I'll help you do dot, Lee!" cried Chris excitedly. "I'll help you vin outd against dot Larrimore und Scapps, and make more money as you can carry, und find outd who you was. Yah, so, helup me!"

"I'll see that you don't lose anything, Chris," Lee answered.

He had taken an instinctive liking to the German boy, and felt that there was a "pay-streak" in his makeup which would repay development.

"Id's peen so long since I'fe had some money in my clothes," Chris went on, "dot I'd like to ged to sellin' dis oil und see a leedle oof der coin goming my vay."

"That's right," answered Lee, jumping down from the wagon; "it's high time we got down to business, for I've got to go out to old Tetly's to-night and close up this deal for the land. I want to get my deed and execute the mortgage, and have both placed on record." Chris got in between the shafts. "I do business right in the middle of the street, Chris—it gives plenty of room for people to get around you. You push at the end and I'll pull here, and we'll snake the wagon out into the trail."

In a few moments the wagon was in position, and young Maverick got up on the seat and pulled out a banjo.

"Can you sing, Chris?" he asked, as he began tuning up.

"You bed my life! I can sing so goot as a—as a——"

Mocking-bird?" suggested Lee.

"Vorse as dot."

"Well, we've got to get the push together, and the only way to do it is to attract attention. So here goes!"

Young Maverick was a rattling good banjo-player,

and the instrument fairly sang under his swiftly moving fingers.

Just as Chris began to sing, and the people started to drift in their direction, a rolling thump of hoofs, coming from a side street, reached their ears.

Neither Lee nor Chris paid any attention to the sound, but suddenly around a corner not more than a hundred feet from the place where the wagon was standing a score or more of steers came pounding pell-mell.

The broadhorns did not continue on down the cross-street, for a man suddenly appeared to turn them.

"Dere he iss!" yelled Chris excitedly, pointing to the man who was heading off the cattle.

"Who?" cried Lee, as he sprang up and cast aside the banjo.

"Scapps!"

Then, in a flash, young Maverick realized what his enemies were attempting to do.

The carload of steers, en route to the Two-G Ranch, were being stampeded along the main street.

Lee half-started to spring from the wagon, but checked himself and straightened his lithe, muscular body.

"Chump!" roared Chris. "Ve vill be run down!"

The Dutch boy would have thrown himself to the ground had not Lee caught his shoulder and held him in the wagon.

"That would be sure death!" cried young Maverick. "Before you got half-way to the walk the steers would be on you. The wagon is the safest place."

While speaking Lee had been pulling off his coat. All at once he began to wave the garment and to yell at the top of his voice, hoping to cause the cattle to divide and pass on either side of the wagon.

In this he was partly successful.

A split appeared in the middle of the oncoming herd, as the animals at that point swerved against others at the side of the moving bunch.

But those at the side did not yield by a hair's breadth, and, as a consequence, the gap in the herd did not open wide enough to let the steers pass the vehicle.

The small wagon bounded beneath a terrific shock; then followed a despairing whoop from Chris, and the wagon was lifted sideways, overturned, and the two boys disappeared amid a crashing of glass and sounds of splintering wood and rending iron.

In the confusion Scapps and Larrimore, who had appeared, tried to steal the valuable paper young Maverick carried, but Chris, recovering his senses in time, blocked their little game, and the two rascals had to get out of town as fast as horse-flesh could carry them in order to escape the aroused citizens.

CHAPTER III.

AT TETLY'S RANCH.

"It's good-by ter them!" said one of the men, in a disappointed tone. "But let 'em look out! This hyar town of Boliver'll hev 'em on the black-list from now on!"

Lee and Chris, while glad that they had managed to retain possession of the contract, were intensely disappointed at the failure to capture Scapps and Larrimore.

If the two rascals could have been locked up until after Lee had completed his deal with old Bill Tetly, a

source of worry would have been lifted from the boy's mind.

After a few minutes' conversation with the bystanders young Maverick and Chris went out to view the wreck of the wagon.

The wreck was complete, and the wagon was good only for the scrap-pile.

Half a dozen bottles were found unbroken, and Lee distributed them gratis among the crowd.

As it was close to supper-time, Lee suggested that they go to the hotel and get a meal and spend the night.

"Vy, my poy," answered Chris, "I hafn't got so mooch as a red cent in my clothes!"

"Don't worry about that, Chris," answered Lee. "I've got enough for the two of us. We're pards, and it's no more than right that I should take care of you."

"You're de best feller vat efer habbened," Chris answered, with feeling. As they turned and made for the hotel the Dutch boy asked: "Whose wagon vas dot, Lee?"

"Mine," young Maverick answered. "I bought it second-hand for \$20, and that's what I'm out, together with an amount of Magic Oil which would have brought me in about \$50 more."

"Ach, vat a luck id iss!" exclaimed the Teuton. "Dose fellers mean pitzness righdt from der trop oof der hat, Lee. Dey would as soon kill us as to look at us; yah, dot's der trut'."

Lee Maverick compressed his lips sternly.

"It's a safe-money break that they've found out by this time that they won't be able to have things their own way," said he. "That quarter-section of oil-land belongs to me—or will belong to me before many hours have passed—and I'm not going to lay down on the proposition just to please Larrimore and Scapps."

At the hotel the boys had supper, lodging, and breakfast.

After breakfast they started for the livery-stable, and on the way Lee dropped into a hardware-store and bought himself a six-shooter and a box of cartridges.

"In all my knocking about the country," said he to Chris, "I've never toted a gun. But I guess there's some need of it now. Hadn't you better throw that old pistol away and let me buy you a modern six-shooter, Chris?"

"Vat?" gasped Chris, catching hold of the horse-pistol with both hands. "Vy, I vouldn't trade dis gun for a car-load oof dose fancy shooden-machines! I haf got pullets"—he pulled out a small canvas bag that appeared extremely heavy—"und I haf got caps"—he brought into sight a box of brass caps—"und I haf got all der paper for vadding vich I need. Ach! I vouldn't gif oop Blitzenmeister! He has peen goot to me, und I sttick py my friends."

"Blitzenmeister!" laughed young Maverick. "Is that what you call the old pop-gun?"

"Sure; Blitz for short. Blitzen iss lighdning in der language mit vich I vas born alretty, und dis gun sphits lighdning venefer I pull der drigger. Yah, you bed someding for noddin'!"

From the hardware-store the boys went on to the livery-stable.

Lee Maverick had a fine bronco in the barn—the animal which had drawn his wagon into town.

As the wagon was gone, and he had no further use

for the harness, he traded the harness with the proprietor of the stable for a saddle, after which he hired a riding-horse for Chris, and the two mounted and set out for old Bill Tetly's ranch.

Tetly's ranch was six miles from Boliver, and, as it was a fine, bright morning, the boys were in excellent spirits.

They beguiled the tedium of the journey by an exchange of mutual experiences.

Chris told how he had landed at Castle Garden, several years before, how his parents had died in New York, and how he had been adopted by a German immigrant, who took him to Minnesota and all but worked him to death. Being a lad of spirit, Chris rebelled against his treatment after a time, and took the old pistol, which had belonged to his father, and the old hatchet, which had belonged to the immigrant, and had gone forth into the world prepared either to cut or to blow his way to fortune. He added, also, that he had done considerable cutting and not a little blowing, but without much success. Still, he had hopes, and that was about all he did have.

Then Lee, in return, told how his first recollections of life were wrapped up in the Bowery, and pretty near the whole East Side of New York City, with after experiences among the characters along the "seamy side" of Chicago; how he was sometimes called "Tom," sometimes "Dick," and sometimes "Harry," but had never had any "last" name whatever; how he had peddled papers and attended night-school; how the desire to find out something about himself had sent him out into the country from place to place, and how he had finally reached Texas and had taken the name of Lee Maverick, fitting it to the initials on his forearm.

When Lee had finished his talk the buildings at old Tetly's ranch hove in sight.

There was a corral out back of old Tetly's barn, and here Lee pulled up his horse.

"Tetly's a hard old chap to deal with, Chris," observed Lee; "he wants the big end of every bargain, and he'll pinch a dollar until he makes the eagle scream. Besides, he's not overhonest. He's married to a mighty nice woman, though, and there's one of the finest girls in the country staying here. You hold my horse and keep out of sight here, and I'll go around to the kitchen door and ask Kitty to tell me how the land lays before I walk in on old Bill and ask for my deed."

"I vill be here, Lee," answered Chris, taking his friend's bridle; "und I vill be ready for any drouble vat shows oop along der pike und heads you vay."

"I'm not looking for any trouble," Lee answered, "but, of course, one can never tell when he's going to bump into a bunch of that article."

As he started to walk away he halted abruptly and pointed off across the plain.

"If your eye-sight is good, Chris," he added, "you can see the top of a derrick over there."

"I can see it so plain as anyding," replied Chris.

"Well, that's old Ab Grimes' well-digger, and it's on my hundred and sixty. When I got through in the house we'll go over there. Grimes and I don't hitch very well, but he's the only man in this section who owns a digging-machine."

Thereupon Lee cut around the back of the high corral and approached the rear of the barn.

He was about to pass the barn when a sudden thought

struck him—a thought which later proved to have been both happy and otherwise.

Giving a cautious glance around, he pulled a folded paper from an inside pocket and thrust it between two stones in the barn's foundation, then proceeded on in the direction of the kitchen door of the house.

Before he reached the door he heard voices in the kitchen.

One voice was Kitty's, as he knew very well, and the other was one with which he was not so familiar, but which he knew well enough to recognize.

Lee's face went a trifle pale, but he shut his teeth resolutely and leaned against the wall of the kitchen, close to the door.

CHAPTER IV.

OLD BILL TETLY.

"You needn't be so high and mighty, Kitty Shane," said one of the voices—a man's voice, and the one which Lee knew well enough to recognize.

"Oh, I needn't, needn't I?" came the exasperated voice of the girl. "Well, you take my advice and get out of this kitchen and leave me alone!"

"You used to care for me, Kitty, up there in Denver."

"I never cared a straw for you, Luke Larrimore! You're a villain, and you know it—a gambler, and a confidence-man, and everything else. It's an ill wind that blows you down here, I know that much. And if you come pestering me you'll be sorry for it, I tell you that straight!"

"Oh! I will? See here, can't you be reasonable? Gad, you're prettier than you used to be!"

"And I'm just as able to take care of myself as I used to be, too! Will you get out of here?"

"Not till I get through talking with you. Mr. Tetly has been telling me about your taking up with this young Lee Maverick——"

"What's that to you?"

"It's little to me, but it's a good deal to you. Young Maverick is a scalawag, and——"

Lee heard a thump, as though Kitty had stamped her foot.

"Don't you say a word against Lee! He's worth a dozen of you, Luke Larrimore! Leave this house!"

"I reckon not, my little spitfire. You've got to give me a kiss for old times' sake. Just one, now. By Jove, I will have it!"

A sound as of a struggle came from within the kitchen, and Lee flew to the door.

But he did not cross the threshold, for as he looked in he saw that the girl was abundantly able to take care of herself.

Larrimore, in his flashy clothes and his white top-hat, was close to Kitty, who, with her sleeves rolled up, had been engaged in her work.

There was a dish-pan in front of her, and as Lee looked in the girl had sprung away from Larrimore and turned toward the table.

The man pressed insolently on, and in a twinkling Kitty had let the would-be masher have the entire contents of the dish-pan.

Larrimore's hat tumbled off as the greasy water deluged his head and shoulders, and he danced up and down and spluttered wrathfully.

"Lee!" cried Kitty, suddenly catching sight of Maverick's smiling face in the doorway.

"On deck, Kitty!" Lee sang back. The next instant he had leaped into the kitchen, had caught Larrimore by the shoulders, and had rushed him through the door, giving him a parting send-off in the shape of a kick.

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come!" cried Kitty.

"You didn't need much help to call the villain down," laughed Lee, making a football of the top-hat and sending it outside after its owner.

"I'll be even with you for this!" fumed Larrimore, rubbing the soap-water from his eyes with one hand and groping for his hip pocket with the other. "I'll be even with both of you for this!"

"If you ever try to force your attentions upon Miss Shane again, you scoundrel," cried Lee, "you'll get even with me in a way you won't like!"

By then Larrimore had managed to jerk a revolver from his pocket.

"Look out!" warned Kitty, and young Maverick slammed the door.

"When did that fellow come here?" asked Lee.

"He came here last night, Lee, and he's been putting up some kind of a job with old Bill. I don't know what it is, but it has something to do with you, and old Bill has been in a tearing rage ever since Larrimore talked with him. Don't stay here, Lee. You're in danger. Please go."

"I've got business with old Tetly," returned young Maverick firmly, "and I'm going to transact it."

"It would be as much as your life is worth to try to do any business with old Bill this morning. He's so worked up he's half-crazy. And Mrs. Tetly is over in Boliver visiting with her sister, so old Bill is having everything his own way. Don't go, Lee!"

"I might as well have it out with Tetly first as last," Lee answered decisively; "and now is as good a time as any."

Just then the kitchen door was flung open, and Kitty gave a muffled scream, thinking Larrimore was coming with his revolver.

It was not Larrimore, however, but old Bill, and he was bringing a shot-gun with him.

Bill Tetly was a six-foot lank-and shaggy specimen of a Texan. He had grayish whiskers all over his face, and shaggy eyebrows, and there was a peculiar twitching to his limbs which suggested palsy.

But the twitching only came when old Bill was excited. Since early manhood the old rancher had been subject to cataleptic-fits, and his wife, Hannah, always feared a fit when Bill got angry, which was often.

"You've got the face to come right into my house, have you, you young whippersnapper!" bellowed old Bill. "After what you've done, I shouldn't think you'd be able to look me in the eyes! Oh, I'll take care of you! Get out o' here, Kit! I'm goin' to have it out with this young scoundrel, an' I don't want you around! Leave the house!"

"See here, Uncle Bill," returned the girl, "you're mad, and——"

"Will you leave?" roared the irate old rancher. "Don't you give me any of your back talk, but git!"

"Go on, Kitty," said Lee, in a low tone; "I'll be all right. Larrimore has been talking to Tetly, and perhaps I can explain matters."

"Old Bill won't listen to reason, and you can't explain a thing! Oh, I wish Aunt Hannah was here! I'll leave the house, Lee, but I'll go and get Ab Grimes——"

"No; don't do that! I'd have another against me if you did."

"I've got to do something!" returned the girl, and turned and ran from the kitchen into the other part of the house.

"You're worse'n a Piegan Injun, Lee Maverick!" shouted old Bill, bringing his shot-gun around in front of him, where it would be handy for sudden use.

"What have I done?" demanded Lee.

"The least you've done is ter insult a friend who is stoppin' under my roof!" answered the rancher. "You kicked him out of my house—my house!"

And old Bill glowered at Lee in a fury.

"He deserved to be kicked out," said young Maverick calmly, "and if you were the kind of an uncle to Kitty that you'd ought to be you'd kick Larrimore off the place."

"Don't you give me any of your back talk! I know my business, you young swindler!"

Lee whitened at the word "swindler."

"See here, Bill Tetly," he cried, "you've gone about far enough! I'm no swindler, and you know it!"

"You are a swindler! If you had gone right down inter my pocket an' taken out a thousand dollars you couldn't be more of a thief! Oh, I know you! Larrimore has told me a few things."

"What has Larrimore told you?" asked Lee, choking back his indignation.

"He's told me how you bought that quarter-section an' only give me \$500 when it's worth \$1,500! Larrimore has offered me \$1,500 for it, an' I'm goin' to sell it to him!"

"You can't sell it to him," answered Lee; "you've already sold it to me."

"I will sell it to him! I haven't given you no deed to the land yet. I'd like to see you get a deed!"

"I've got a contract for a deed, and that contract will hold good in any court of law in the land! I haven't swindled you. If my plans pan out I'll make myself a rich man, and you'll be ten times richer than I am. If I find what I'm sure I'm going to on that quarter-section, the land you own all around it will be immensely valuable."

"Oh, you can't smooth it over!" sneered old Bill. "I'm goin' to sell that quarter to Larrimore, an' you've got to give me back that contract, and I'll hand you the \$50 you paid me." Old Bill tapped his vest pocket. "I've got the money right here. You give me the contract, and give it to me right now! D'ye hear?"

"I won't give you the contract, Mr. Tetly," Lee answered as respectfully, but as firmly as he knew how. "This man Larrimore is a rascal, and he's trying to beat both of us!"

"Give me that contract!" cried old Bill, raising his shot-gun. "I'd shoot you down as quick as I'd shoot a dog!"

Young Maverick knew that the old rancher was beside himself and half-crazed by the stories Luke Larrimore had been telling him; for that reason he would not bring out his revolver, although his position was one of the greatest peril.

The thing for him to do was to resort to a ruse of some kind and get out of the house, for it was out of the question to ask old Bill to give a deed just then, feeling as he did. Had Lee made the request, he would probably have been shot on the spot for his temerity.

"Well, well," said Lee, feigning fright and fumbling at the pocket of his coat; "don't shoot, Mr. Tetly—please don't shoot!"

"Give me the contract!" returned old Bill curtly.

After much fumbling, Lee took from his inside pocket a folded paper on which he had been figuring up the results of his Magic Oil business, and advanced toward old Bill, with the paper outstretched in his trembling hand.

If the rancher failed to recognize the document at first glance, Lee figured that he would have time enough to get out of the house and to his horse, back of the corral, without resorting to violence.

But old Bill was sharp enough to see that the folded paper had not the legal form of the contract.

"No, you don't!" cried Tetly.

Lee was close enough to catch the gun and jerk it away from Tetly, and he did it with a quickness that almost carried the rancher off his feet with surprise.

"Stop, you!" roared old Bill, as young Maverick darted out of the door, with the gun in his hand.

Lee, however, kept right on, and he might have made good his escape if another individual had not taken a hand in the set-to.

This other man was Scapps, who was seated on his horse just around the corner of the house.

Scapps heard old Bill's yell, and turned his head just in time to see Lee making in the direction of the barn at a run, carrying the shot-gun.

As the reader already knows, Scapps was a cattle-man, and his equipment was complete, so there was a rawhide riata at his saddle-horn.

In a jiffy Scapps realized that his chance had come, and he jerked the riata from the place where it hung, raised himself in his stirrups, and swung the rope around his head.

The foreman was a master hand with the rope, and when he released the coils the noose sped like an arrow to its mark.

Before Lee had a chance to learn what was going on he was caught about the head and shoulders and slammed backward to the ground.

Of course, they found nothing on the boy. Old Tetly was so angry he wanted to murder Lee, so that Scapps had to wrestle with him. In the confusion the Dutch boy crept out from the barn, cut the cords they had passed around his chum, and the two, mounting, dashed away.

As they rode out from behind the big corral fence they sighted three horsemen off over the plain, spurring at a jaded gallop in the direction of Tetly's ranch.

"Gee-whiz!" exclaimed Lee, eying the mounted men.

"Vat's der madder?" asked Chris.

"One of those men over there is the sheriff, and the other two must be his deputies. I've had a time of it this morning, and if I could only get Scapps into the hands of the sheriff I wouldn't feel that I had had all my trouble for nothing."

Just then they looked toward Scapps, and saw him standing with the limp form of old Bill in his arms.

The rancher's face was purple and there was foam on his lips.

"Py shinks!" muttered Chris. "Der cowpoy has kilt dot feller, Lee!"

"No; he hasn't. Old Bill has simply got one of his fits. It's a wonder the fit didn't come on before this."

As the foreman supported the unconscious rancher his startled eyes could be seen roaming about the spot where Lee had lain.

Scapps saw his cut and ruined riata, and was plainly in a state of mind on account of Lee's absence from the neighborhood.

"Look over this way, Scapps!" shouted Lee.

Scapps looked that way, with a jump; then, shouting an oath, he flung old Bill to the ground and leaped to his horse. In a moment he had gained the saddle and was off at breakneck speed after the boys.

CHAPTER V.

KITTY IN DANGER.

"Vat you do dot for, Lee?" asked Chris, as he and his friend larruped their horses into a dead run.

"I want to lure Scapps near enough to the sheriff so that we can capture him."

Seeing the sheriff, Scapps turned and made off. Lee explained matters, and the sheriff, borrowing the fresh horses of the boys, took a deputy and hastily pursued.

While Granger, the deputy, was putting up the horses in the barn Lee and Chris picked up old Bill, who was still unconscious, and carried him into the house and laid him on a lounge.

"There's nothing we can do for him, Chris," said young Maverick. "If he's let alone he'll come out of it all right. I wonder what became of Larrimore? And where is Kitty?"

"I hafn't seen neider vone," said Chris.

Lee called for the girl, but no answer was returned, so it was evident that she was nowhere about the house.

"It must be that she is over at that well-drilling machine," remarked Lee. "She said she was going over there to get Grimes to help me. I told her not to go, but she may have gone, all the same, so we'll push along in that direction."

By this time they were at the rear of the barn, and Lee came to a halt.

"I might as well take the contract now," he observed. "If I find I can't exchange it for the deed I'll take it to the bank in Boliver and have it stored in the bank-vault. That paper's too valuable for me to be taking any chances with it."

While speaking, Lee had made his way to the place where he had hidden the document, and he bent over and thrust his hand in between the two loose stones.

"Great Cæsar's ghost!" muttered Lee, a wild expression coming over his face.

"Ain't it dere?" asked Chris quickly.

"No!"

"Are you sure dot's der place vere you put id?"

"I could take my oath!"

"Meppy you make a misdake mit yourseluf, Lee. Look in some odder places."

They both searched, looking into every crack and crevice on that side of the foundation of the barn, but without result.

"After all the fuss to keep hold of that contract and then to lose it in such a fool way as this!" exclaimed Lee.

Suddenly he began examining the ground for foot-prints. At that point the ground was of a soft, clayey nature, and readily yielded an impression of the foot.

He was not long in finding what he sought—the mark of a broad shoe well studded with heavy nails. It was the mark of such foot-gear as a laborer might wear, and not of the patent leathers affected by Larrimore, nor of the long, thin-heeled boots worn by the cattleman, Scapps.

There was some satisfaction in discovering that neither Larrimore nor Scapps had taken the document, and young Maverick began to pluck up heart.

"We've got to find the fellow who wore those shoes," said Lee. "But I'm not going to begin on that trail until I learn what has become of Kitty. We'll go on over to the well-drilling outfit, Chris, and see if Kitty is there. I have a feeling that she's in some sort of danger, and there is only one man I know of who could be the source of any danger to Kitty, and that is Larrimore."

Chris was of the opinion that Lee's suggestion was a good one to follow, so the boys set their faces in the direction of the tall derrick of the drilling-jack and made rapidly toward it.

As they came closer and closer, and got a view of the drilling-jack and its surroundings, their pulses quickened and their speed increased until they were proceeding at a run.

At first they made out three figures at the foot of the drilling-machine, and as they hurried on they saw that two of these figures were those of men and the third that of a woman.

Then in a few moments they made out the men to be Luke Larrimore and Abner Grimes and the woman to be Kitty.

The girl stood in front of the men, and seemed to be pleading with them about something.

Larrimore was off to the left, and Grimes was a little in front of him, so that Kitty seemed to be addressing Grimes, rather than Larrimore.

"Dot's a funny combination!" muttered Chris, feeling at his rope belt to see that Blitzenmeister was there and ready for business. "I pelieve, so helup me, dot dere's goin' to be someding doing, Lee!"

"If either of those men raises a hand against Kitty there'll be plenty doing, and no mistake!" young Maverick returned.

Larrimore had wiped the greasy water off his clothes and had knocked the dents out of his hat, so that he looked little the worse for his experience in old Bill's kitchen.

But that he had not forgotten the experience was evident from the ugly look which he turned upon the girl.

Suddenly the three near the drilling-machine heard the approach of the boys and gazed in their direction.

A look of relief passed over Kitty's face.

"Hurry, Lee!" she cried. "Grimes has got your——"

She did not finish her remark, for, with a fierce exclamation, Grimes had sprung toward her and given her a savage push which threw her to the ground.

"Leave her alone, you coward!" cried Lee angrily.

Leaping back, Abner Grimes turned half around and glared at young Maverick.

Chris went around the derrick and jumped on the short ladder that led to its top, pulling old Blitzenmeister as he climbed.

Noting the Dutch boy's move, Larrimore swept a hand under his coat and brought out his six-shooter.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FLIGHT OF GRIMES.

Before any one spoke Kitty picked herself up from the ground where she had been thrown by the brutal well-digger and possessed herself of her sun-bonnet, which had fallen from her head.

Lee, meanwhile, had covered Grimes.

"Put up that gun!" went on Grimes, backing off warily. "What do you mean by drawin' a gun on me?"

"What do you mean by treating Miss Shane in the way you did?" retorted Lee.

"That's my business, and it's none of your put in!"

"I'll make it my business," returned Lee.

"He's a little bit gone on Miss Shane," sneered Larrimore.

"You keep shtill mit yourseluf!" called Chris from the derrick. "Oof you don'd, you bed my life I let Blitzenmeister shpeak a vort for himseluf, und dot vill seddle der pitzness all aroundt!"

Lee retreated until he was standing beside the girl.

"Go back to the house, Kit," said he. "Your uncle has had one of his spells, and he needs you."

"I'll go," answered the girl, with flashing eyes, "but not until I tell you what Abner Grimes has done."

"You can tell me later."

"I'm going to tell you now, so you will have a chance to get that contract away from him."

"Contract?" echoed Lee.

"Yes; he saw you put it away, and these men have been quarreling over it."

"Ach, du lieber!" fumed Chris Augenblick, a glitter coming into his blue eye as he sighted along the barrel of the pistol. "Shust say der vort, Lee, und you bed someding for nodding dot Blitzenmeister vill put a hole droo bot' dose chays!"

"Don't go off at half-cock, Chris," returned young Maverick sharply. Then added, his eyes on Grimes, but addressing the girl: "Did Grimes give the contract to Larrimore?"

"No; I am sure he did not."

"So you're in this, too, are you, Grimes?" Lee demanded of the scowling well-digger. "I always knew you were something of a rascal, but I never thought you'd take my good money for digging this well and fight against me while in my employ."

"Think I'm an ijut?" snorted Grimes, looking shiftily about him. "Don't I know blame well ye ain't borin' this hole for water?"

"I don't care what you know, or think you know!" Lee answered warmly. "I'm done with you, here and now! Pick up your traps an' get off this ground!"

"Ye ain't got any right ter this ground, an', consequently, ye kain't order me off'n it!" blustered the well-digger.

"You'll find out what right I've got here before you're many hours older!"

A reddish haze was coming before young Maverick's eyes. He knew the sign well. His temper was rising, and something was likely to happen.

Luke Larrimore turned a quick look at Grimes, and the well-digger, catching the confidence-man's meaning, drew in his horns and seemed to become more amenable to reason.

"Well," resumed Grimes, "ye offered me a hundred dollars ter put this hole down 300 feet. I got ter hev thet hundred afore I leave here."

"You're not down more than a hundred feet," said Lee.

"It don't make no odds! I'm willin' ter complete the contract, an' I've got ter hev the hull amount ef ye make me stop. Thet's the law. Hey, Larrimore?"

"Sure thing," replied Larrimore.

"It's more than you're entitled to," muttered Lee, jerking off his hat with one hand and holding it under his hand while he reached into the lining and brought out his three \$100 bills. "I've got the stuff to pay you, though, and the minute you hand over that contract you get your money."

"Oh, ho!" cried the well-digger, with a grim chuckle. "Ye kain't work no game like that on me, not if I know myself!"

"Fork it over!"

Young Maverick was worked up to a pitch of desperation, and as he made his demand he brought his new revolver on a line with the well-digger's breast.

"Und vile my pard iss working his game mit Grimes, Misder Larrimore," put in Chris, "don'd you forged to rememper dot it's tangerous for you to make any monkey-doodle pitzness mit dot gun!"

It looked just then as though Lee and Chris had the upper hand and were going to carry the day.

There was not a particle of bravado in Lee's demeanor, but his every movement was full of a quiet determination to have his rights, at whatever cost.

Grimes fell back a step and exchanged expressive looks with Larrimore.

"Out with it!" cried Lee. "I haven't any time to waste on you, Grimes!"

Slowly the well-digger brought his right hand toward the breast of his shirt. The fingers of the hand were hidden from sight in the flannel when Chris, from his perch on the derrick, gave a triumphant yell.

"Der sheriff, Lee!" he shouted. "Here gomes der sheriff alretty, und dot odder man vat vent away mit him."

"Have they got Scapps?" asked Lee.

"Nix; but you bed my life dey'll get Misder Larrimore and Misder Grimes, und you'll get dot paper back so quick as anyding, und——"

Just then another scene was shoved into the grooves.

The coming of Dobson and his deputy had captured Chris Augenblick's entire attention. Blitzenmeister, as the Teuton called his big horse-pistol, had been withdrawn from covering Larrimore, and was being waved triumphantly above the Dutch boy's head.

This left Larrimore free to act, and he was not slow to take advantage of the opportunity.

"Look out, Lee!" came the shrill warning from Kitty.

Lee whirled partly in his tracks just as the kid-glove sport pounced upon him.

Young Maverick's revolver cracked, but in the excitement of the moment the bullet went wild, and he and Larrimore went down together.

Larrimore had not forgotten the kick Lee had given him when ejecting him from the kitchen of Bill Tetly's house, and he put forth all his strength in making the onset.

The revolver fell out of young Maverick's hands as he dropped with Larrimore, and Kitty picked it up.

"Cut for it, Grimes!" yelled Larrimore.

The well-drilling machine was operated by horse-

power, and the bronco which furnished the power was close at hand.

Grimes leaped for the bronco like a rabbit, unhooked the traces, flung himself on the animal's back, and was off at full speed.

Chris was so excited by this sudden turn of events that he could hardly see straight.

"Schiminy grickets!" he whooped, then brought up Blitzenmeister and blazed away at the fleeing well-digger.

The pistol went off with the roar of a small cannon, and Chris also went off—went off the derrick heels over head, owing to the tremendous recoil of the old-fashioned firearm.

For a moment there was a pall of smoke over the scene, and when it had cleared away young Maverick was just rolling Larrimore underneath, Dobson and Bently were just reining up their horses and dismounting on the scene of the row, and Chris was just raising himself to a sitting posture on the ground.

"What's all this shooting about?" cried Dobson.

Neither Kitty, nor Lee, nor Chris vouchsafed any reply.

The girl was too bewildered, Chris seemed to be having a fit, and young Maverick was too busy.

Dealing Larrimore a sharp blow, Lee succeeded in releasing himself, and sprang erect and leaped toward the horse from which the sheriff had just dismounted.

To get astride the animal's back and dart away on the trail of Grimes took Lee but a moment.

Muttering an oath, Luke Larrimore got up, picked up his white top-hat, and began brushing off his clothes.

CHAPTER VII.

FRANCISCO, THE SHEEP-HERDER.

"Do you know about this?" Dobson inquired of Kitty.

"I know all about it," the girl answered.

"Then tell me what happened."

"That man"—Kitty indicated Larrimore with a nod of her head—"hired Abner Grimes to steal a paper from Lee Maverick. Grimes got it, and Lee was trying to get it back. That's all. You saw how Grimes got away, I suppose, and how Lee followed him on the horse you had been riding. If you do the right thing, Mr. Dobson, you'll arrest Luke Larrimore and take him to jail."

"He's got too much sense to do anything of that kind," said Larrimore, casting one of his evil looks at the girl.

"I've got too much sense to do anything else," said Dobson.

"You mean to say that you'll arrest me?"

"That's what I mean to say."

"But this girl has made a mistake. What Grimes did has nothing to do with me."

"I'm taking you in for what you and Scapps did. Hand over your gun."

"But—"

"Hand it over!"

Larrimore yielded, with a very bad grace. Taking his weapon, the sheriff marched him in the direction of old Bill's house.

"I shall have to go with them, Chris," said Kitty, after an anxious look in the direction taken by Lee.

"My uncle has had one of his spells, and I should have been back at the house before this."

"Vich vay vas id Lee vent?" Chris inquired.

Kitty told him, and he mounted the horse which Bently had been riding and followed on the trail of his friend.

Meantime, young Maverick had not been having matters all his own way by any means.

Grimes had a good start when Lee took up the pursuit, and the boy could just distinguish the man's dark figure, away to the west, making all haste and pushing his horse to the utmost.

The line of flight taken by Grimes finally brought him to a small water course, along whose banks grew a fringe of timber.

Lee saw the well-digger disappear within the chaparral, and his heart fell, for he knew that the man had materially increased his chances of final escape.

When the boy rode into the timber he saw no trace of Grimes, but heard a loud bark off somewhere to his left.

Swerving in this direction, he came presently upon a small shanty.

A horse, wet with sweat and breathing heavily, was tied in front of the hut, not far from the place where a shepherd-dog was lying in the sun.

There were pieces of a harness still attached to the horse, but, even if there had not been, Lee would have known that the animal belonged to Grimes, and was the one he had taken off the drilling-machine.

The door of the hut was standing partly open, and young Maverick leaped down and hurried toward it.

Before he could enter, however, a short, thick-set man stepped out in front of him and barred his way.

The man was a Mexican, as Lee could plainly see.

"What you want?" asked the man.

"I want to speak with the man who rode that horse." Lee turned and pointed to the bronco ridden by Grimes.

"He no here," replied the Mexican.

"I'm going into the house and find out, anyway," and young Maverick attempted to brush past, but was stayed by the bulky form of the greaser.

"Diablo!" gritted the man, a fierce light springing into his eyes as his hand darted to the breast of his shirt and brought out an ever-ready stiletto. "You no go into de house!"

"Two can play at that game!" cried Lee, and flung his hand back to his hip pocket.

But his revolver wasn't there, and, like a flash, he remembered that it had been knocked out of his hand and that Kitty had taken possession of it.

Young Maverick was at a loss for only a moment. He had a quick wit, and kept his hand on his hip while he went on:

"Put up that knife, you rascal! Put it up, I tell you!"

The Mexican hesitated a moment, and then flung the blade from him.

"That's better," said Lee, still keeping his hand on his hip. "Now, back into the house."

The greaser executed his retrograde movement, and Lee followed.

A single room was all the shanty contained, and this single room was untenanted, save by young Maverick and the owner of the premises. Grimes was nowhere in evidence.

There was no possible place in the interior of the shanty where the well-digger could hide, and there was nothing for it but for Lee to acknowledge himself on the wrong track and smother his disappointment.

"Who are you?" he demanded, whirling on the Mexican.

"Me Francisco," answered the other. "Me sheep-herder."

"What became of the man who rode that horse?"

For reply Francisco shrugged his shoulders, and then dropped into a chair and fell into a convulsion of merriment.

"He no here," said Francisco, when he was able to speak. "I tole you dat already."

"Where is he?"

"He gone. Took Francisco's horse—fresh horse, you sabe?—and ride away like lickety-split!"

"Which way did he go?"

"No sabe."

Lee spun angrily around on his heel and made for the door.

"Muchacho!" Francisco called after him.

Young Maverick faced about, and found Francisco standing up, with a scrap of yellow paper in his hand.

"Dis is for you; gringo say me give him to you."

The scrap had been torn from a corner of a sheet of wrapping-paper, and contained a few hastily scrawled words.

"Give me a half-interest in that quarter-section, and I will give you the contract. If you accept, send word to me at the Two-G Ranch."

There was no signature to this communication, and the spelling and writing were so bad that it took Lee several moments to figure out what Grimes was trying to get at.

The well-digger must have done some quick work in order to exchange horses with Francisco and write that note and clear out before Lee arrived.

There was small doubt, however, but that Francisco was Grimes' friend, and had demanded few explanations.

So Lee turned back, and with Chris made his way to Bill Tetly's place.

After a brief rest the boys returned to Boliver, young Maverick again possessed of his revolver—Kitty having returned it to him.

Lee had made up his mind to see Dobson and have him and his deputies proceed to the Two-G Ranch and arrest both Scapps and Grimes.

It was Lee's intention to go along.

Although he had little faith that this move would lead to the discovery of the contract—since Grimes would be sharp enough to look out for a proceeding of that kind—yet there appeared nothing else to do, and Lee felt as though he must be doing something.

After the horses had been stabled and the boys had had supper at the hotel they went out to find Dobson.

He was not on the streets, nor at his house, and no one had seen either him or his deputies.

Futhermore, Larrimore was not in the jail, nor in any of the gambling-rooms or tough resorts which he usually frequented while in Boliver.

Lee was nonplused, and when he went to bed, at about 11 o'clock, it was with a well-defined premonition that trouble of some unexpected kind was brewing.

Receiving word in the morning through an old ac-

quaintance, one Jeff Girou, that they might find Grimes at Twin Buttes, Lee and his German friend rode there, only to meet the sheriff, Larrimore, and Scapps. The sheriff seemed to have had a change of heart, and was ready to arrest Lee on the charge of robbing Larrimore; but the two boys dashed away on their horses, and sought to escape through a desperate plunge into the river from off a high cliff.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DUGOUT.

The plunge from the steep bank was an exceedingly dangerous one, not because of the jump particularly, but because of the swirling and foamy river into which the two boys leaped their horses.

Swept down the stream the two boys were suddenly yanked out of the torrent by unknown hands.

"A glim!" called a hoarse voice that went to Lee Maverick's brain like a knell. "Give us a glim, Quirk, an' be quick about it!"

"Don't bust a gallus, Jeff!" panted a second voice. "Wot'll de kid be doin' w'ile I'm usin' me two lunch-hooks t' strike a light?"

"De kid'll lay right w'ere yous drop him."

A sound as of some one falling or being thrown was heard by Lee, and shortly afterward there came the scratching of a match, and a tall, slouchy man, with a gaunt and grizzled face, could be seen applying the match to a bit of candle.

On the ground at this man's feet sat Chris, his eyes big with astonishment.

"Vat der tickens iss id all apoudt?" murmured the Dutch boy. "Vere dit ve drop to, anyvay?"

"You kids dropped in on me an' my pal," spoke up another voice, and Chris turned and saw a stocky individual holding Lee by the collar.

Lee was looking into the man's face, with an expression not only of amazement, but of defiance.

It was not a handsome face, that of the man who was clinging to Lee's collar.

There was a month's stubble of beard about the flabby jowls, and the eyes were small, black, and beadlike.

Something about the eyes suggested a snake, and the effect of the likeness was heightened when the man gave an ill-omened grin, which showed two rows of yellow teeth.

"Ye ain't s'prised ter see me, young Maverick," said the man, "'cause ye must have knowed I was in this part o' the country by that note I pushed under yer door at the hotel. Can't ye say somethin'? Howlin' blazes! Ye act like ye'd gone dippy! Don't he, Quirk?"

"He certainly do," said the man who was holding the candle. "We'll be wuss'n dippy, too, Jeff, if we stays here an' lets them two coves wot was chasin' dese kids rout us out. Wotever yer goin' ter do, do it, an' don't waste no time."

"You put that note under my door, did you, Jeff Girou?" asked Lee, when the hand of his captor was finally withdrawn from his collar.

"Wasn't the two letters, 'J. G.,' signed ter the note? Don't go an' tell me ye didn't know what them two letters stood fer. 'Tain't possible ye didn't know."

"And you threw that bomb?" went on Lee.

"Ye know blamed well that dynamite is my specialty. I've got more bombs, too—allers go loaded with 'em.

An' le'me tell ye, kid, ef you an' yer pardy hadn't drapped in on us, them two coves that was chasin' you would hev connected with de swiftest kind of a blow-up, an' don't ye fergit it."

The ruffian's speech savored of the west and of the east—of the frontier and of the purlieus of the metropolis. There was small doubt but that he was an all-around rascal, ready for anything and capable of the most desperate expedients.

"What are you following me up for, Girou?" young Maverick asked, after a long look into the man's face.

"I'm goin' ter help ye, this trip," replied Girou. "Me an' my hobo friend, Quirk Latham, hev kept our eyes on ye ever sence ye struck Texas. 'Dere's a kid, Quirk,' says I, 'that's sure goin' t' make 'is pile. I've knowed him ever sence he was knee-high t' a grasshopper,' I says, 'an' he's got it in 'im ter git ter de top. An' w'en he gits t' de top,' I says funder, 'he's a-goin' t' divvy wid Jeff Girou, so I'm goin' t' help him,' I says, an' dat's wot I am, Lee."

"How did you know I was looking for Grimes?" asked Lee.

"I learned dat as I learns everythin'—by keepin' my peepers open an' mixin' wid people."

"Do you know why I'm after Grimes?"

"Sure; he's got a contract fer some oil-land dat you want. Keep after Grimes, son, an' ye'll git de contract. Quirk an' I are goin' ter help, an' you'll win out."

The word "son," whether spoken colloquially or not, had a strange effect on young Maverick and caused him to draw away from Jeff Girou with something like loathing.

"Don't you git leery o' me, kid," spoke up Girou, with an ill-omened smirk. "You needs me in yer bizness, remember dat."

"How do you know that Grimes is in Twin Buttes?" asked Lee.

"Kain't ye be satisfied wid my jest tellin' ye dat I know?"

"I'd like to have you tell me how you happen to know."

"It'll take too long t' t'row dat inter ye, Lee, an' we can't spare de time jes' now. Dis 'ere dugout is one dat Quirk knew of, an' we have been layin' low here ever sence we hit dis part o' de kentry."

"Where is the place where we dropped through?"

"Dat's back a ways, in de main part o' de burrow. Ye see, son, dis usefer be a robbers' roost an' dere's more ways o' gittin' out dan t'roo de front door."

Jeff Girou chuckled as he spoke.

"We're in a bore," he went on, "dat leads direck t' de bank o' de river; an' right at de place w'ere we reach de bank dere's a boat. Come on, Maverick, an' we'll show ye de way out. Once in de boat an' ye' got a clear path ahead ter Twin Buttes. De boat'll take ye dere."

"What's to keep the sheriff and Scapps from coming in here on us?" he asked.

"Nothin' ter hinder, arter they once find the openin' inter the bore; an' dat's de reason I t'ink it's advisable fer us ter hike."

"Afore we hike, Jeff," said Quirk, with a meaning look at his pal, "better settle dat odder bizness."

"Sure! I was blame nigh forgittin' thet."

Reaching for young Maverick, Girou suddenly jerked off his hat.

"Here," cried Lee, making a spring to recover his property.

"Take it easy, kid," said Dynamite Jeff, evading the boy and giving a hoarse laugh.

Young Maverick reached for his revolver, but discovered that the weapon was missing.

"Is this what ye're lookin' fer?" inquired Girou, displaying Lee's six-shooter.

"Yes," answered the boy. "Give it to me."

"An' let ye plant a bullet between my ribs while I'm gittin' de mon out o' dis hat? No, t'anks."

Then, while he presented the revolver with his right hand and held young Maverick at bay, Girou pulled the three \$100 bills from the hat with his left and slipped them into his pocket.

"Now," remarked Girou coolly, "I guess we kin push on t' de river. Walk ahead o' me, Lee—I kain't t'ink o' lettin' ye foller behind."

Followed by the two men, the boys took their way through the dark passage which burrowed through the hill and came out at the river's edge.

The entrance to the tunnel was screened with brush, and when Lee and Chris forced their way through they found themselves close to a boat that had been hollowed from a log and was tossing and bumping against the stake to which it was tied.

"Dere's wot ye take t' git ye t' Twin Buttes," said Girou, attempting to follow Quirk through the brush at the entrance to the burrow.

Quirk had got through all right, but Girou, owing to his stocky build, had his clothing caught and found himself blockaded.

The more he struggled the more he seemed to entangle himself, and finally he voiced an angry oath and called upon Quirk to come and help him.

Quirk turned back, and Lee brought his lips close to Chris Augenblick's ear and whispered:

"Now's our chance to get that money back, Chris. You take care of Quirk and I'll do my best to get the money away from Dynamite Jeff. If we win out, we'll take to the boat and hurry down the river."

Chris nodded his head and both boys made a rush.

With their attention taken up elsewhere, the two men were at a disadvantage.

In some manner, the Dutch boy had managed to preserve his huge pistol, although his hatchet had been lost at the time he was thrown from the back of the horse into the water.

Blitzenmeister, of course, was useless so far as its ability to shoot was concerned, but Chris had clubbed the weapon, bringing it down on Quirk's head with a resounding thwack.

Quirk tumbled like a tenpin in a bowling-alley, and Lee pounced upon Girou just as, by a violent effort, the hobo freed himself from the encircling brush.

"Give me that money," panted young Maverick.

"Not if I know myself!"

Lee flung himself upon Girou and the two went down and rolled over and over on the ground.

"Break away, thar!" shouted a voice.

Startled, Lee tore himself from the clutches of Girou and regained his feet.

"Py shiminy!" groaned Chris, "id's all oop! Nodding is coming our vay any more, Lee; nodding at all."

As Lee looked around he saw three men on horseback

covering them with revolvers and rifle—Dobson, Scapps, and Larrimore.

Larrimore had found the ford and crossed the stream, joining his comrades in the ravine on the site of the cave-in dugout.

While they were getting out Lee's horse, preparatory to looking for the boys, the sounds of conflict drew them back to the river, and they galloped in that direction just in time to take a hand in the set-to.

"All right," said young Maverick resignedly; "it's your trick, Dobson."

Jeff Girou sat up blinking, shifting his eyes from one to another of the three men.

"Wot're ye chasin' the kids fer, anyway?" demanded the hobo.

"They're looking for three hundred dollars that Larrimore says I stole from him," declared Lee.

Dynamite Jeff blinked harder and harder. He was just beginning to understand the situation.

"Cover the outfit, Larrimore, you and Scapps," said the sheriff, slipping from his saddle. "I'll search young Maverick. If he's got the money on him, he goes back with us."

"Then he goes back, an' don't ye fergit it!" exulted Larrimore. "He's made us a deuce of a lot of trouble, but here's where we wing 'im."

"Sure thing," struck in Scapps. "He's about the nerviest kid I ever had any dealin's with, but right hyer is whar we apply the kibosh. Take the dinero away from him, Dobson."

"Look in his hat first," suggested Larrimore.

Young Maverick submitted quietly to the search made by the sheriff.

The money, of course, was not found in the hat, nor anywhere else about young Maverick's clothes.

"The Dutchman's got it," cried Larrimore.

But Chris didn't have it, as was quickly made manifest.

"He's hid it somewhere," cried the baffled Larrimore.

"Search that big hobo, thar," said Scapps.

Dynamite Jeff made a move as though he would stand Dobson off, but Scapps' long revolver, covering him threateningly, caused him to change his mind.

In the second pocket into which Dobson thrust his hand the money was found.

"Three one-hundred-dollar bills," said the sheriff.

"That's it," remarked Larrimore, holding out his hand.

"I'll hold onto the loot until you prove your right to it," went on Dobson, as he coolly thrust the money into his pocket.

"The boy had the money," averred Larrimore angrily. "He's in cahoots with that big bloke."

"Couldn't have been," returned the sheriff; "if he had been in cahoots with this tramp, what was he and the other boy fightin' with him an' his pal for?"

"Take the kids in, anyhow," said Scapps.

"Not much," returned Dobson; "this big hobo is the one we take in." He turned to Lee. "I don't know all the ins and outs of this deal, Maverick," he continued, "but it looks as though you had been imposed on. I'm sorry, and I'll keep this money until I hear from you and we can get to the bottom of this matter."

"We're free to go?" asked Lee.

"Free as the air—for all of me."

A storm of protest went up from Larrimore and Scapps.

"Cork!" commanded Dobson sternly. "Raise a hand, either of you, to prevent those boys from leaving here and I'll pump a slug out of this gun. It won't go wild, either."

Silence followed. Quirk rubbed his head and looked at Girou, and Girou, craftily grinning, focused his eyes on young Maverick.

The Dutch boy followed his friend down to the water's edge, and they untied the boat, got into it, and picked up the oars.

"That big duffer," Lee called back to Dobson, "is Jeff Girou. He's got my revolver. Throw it to me, will you?"

The sheriff took the weapon from Girou's pocket and tossed it into the boat.

"I'll be back in Boliver one of these days," Lee went on, "and I want you to keep Girou, and Larrimore, and Scapps in the jail there. I've got a case against them, and I'll prove it to everybody before I am through."

Dobson made no answer, and the boys bent to the oars and sent the boat out into the current and spinning down the river.

CHAPTER IX.

THE GOLD COUNTRY.

It was evening when, completely fagged out, they reached the railroad town of Twin Buttes, grounded their boat, and sprang ashore.

"I'm so hungry as I can't tell," said Chris.

"We'll have to get a good square meal," answered Lee.

"How ve goin' to do dot without any money?"

"I'll sell my six-shooter."

"Or I might sell Blitzenmeister, eh?"

"You couldn't get a couple of copper cents for that pop-gun, Chris."

"Vat? Id's der pest gun vat ever vas. Blitzenmeister iss a good vone, I tell you dot."

"Good for nothing. I'd rather be in front of it than behind it when it goes off. You've used it since I knew you, Chris, and have been kicked galley-west."

"Look oudt der next time, Lee! Der next time iss der charm, you know."

Lee laughed a little at the Dutch boy's confidence in the antiquated shooting-machine, and they made for the town and entered a general store where everything was dealt in—bought and sold.

Here Lee disposed of his six-shooter, receiving \$3 for it, just half what it had cost him.

Having consummated this deal, the boys went to a hotel and secured a hearty supper, which cost them 50 cents each and left \$2 still in the treasury.

"I feel all right now," said Chris. "Der quicker ve can findt Grimes der quicker ve can ged pack dot contract und der quicker ve go back to Poliver. Led's shtrike a gait."

"We'll make a few inquiries here before we strike a gait," answered Lee, and stepped up to the desk in the office of the hotel.

The register lay on the desk, and Lee glanced it over. In a moment an exclamation of satisfaction escaped him.

"Vat id iss?" asked the eager Chris.

"I guess Grimes didn't think he'd be followed," ob-

served Lee, "for he's stopping in this very hotel and has signed his name on this register. Look here, Chris. 'Abner Grimes, Boliver, Texas.' See it?"

Chris saw the name and gave a flutter of excitement. "I'd like to see this man," went on Lee, speaking to the clerk who was behind the desk. "Is he in his room?"

"What man?" queried the clerk, coming nearer.

"Abner Grimes."

"You can't see him."

"Why not?"

"Because he's left town. Went West on the afternoon train."

Chris had to catch the counter to keep from falling.

"Do you know where he went?" queried Lee, mastering his disappointment as well as he was able.

"Somewhere in the Arizony gold country—up in the mines, you know—but he didn't say jest the place he was strikin' fer. Friend o' your'n?"

"We wanted to see him, that's all," replied Lee, and left the office, followed by Chris.

Back to the general store where Lee had sold his revolver the boys went, laid out half a dollar in crackers, cheese, and gingersnaps; then they returned to the railroad-track, climbed into one of the two "empties" that stood on the siding, and quietly waited for the freight to pull in and carry them West.

The train puffed into Twin Buttes according to schedule, hooked onto the two cars, and steamed westward.

Worn out by the exciting events of the day, the boys dozed off into slumber.

When Lee awoke it was broad day, and a beam of sun was struggling in through a crack at the side of the sliding door of the car.

Leaping up, Lee hurried to the door, pushed it still farther open, and looked out.

They were puffing along on an up grade, through a mountainous country.

As he continued to look, the freight rolled past a gap in the hills—a gap where nestled a few adobe houses and where there was a station—but no stop was made.

A painted board on the station caught Lee's eye, and he read the words: "Cache d'Or."

It was a case of luck, pure luck, that the boy had happened to waken when he did and to take his survey from the car door.

He was not much of a believer in signs and omens, but he had a feeling that this bit of good fortune presaged a favorable outcome to the mission which had brought him to the gold country.

Hurrying to Chris, he aroused the Teuton with a vigorous shake.

"Vat's der madder?" asked Chris sleepily.

"Here we are, Chris."

"Vere?"

"Cache d'Or."

"Py chiminy!" exclaimed the Teuton, getting up. "It don'd seem more as a minid ago dot I vent to shleep in Dexas."

Lee picked up the paper bag with the eatables and hurried to the door.

"We'll have to jump," said he.

"Dot's easy. Der drain is on der up grade und ve can fall off mitoudt any drouble."

Waiting until the ground at the track-side became

fairly level, Lee made a flying leap and landed right side up, without a stumble.

Chris followed him, but, failing to apply his air-brakes properly, went off his pins, and might have suffered serious results had his friend not grabbed him.

They stood where they were until the train rounded a bend and vanished from sight; then, as they tramped ties back toward the station of Cache d'Or, they saw a spring peeping out of the rocks along the right of way, and sat down there and ate their breakfast, topping off the meal with a deep draft of the cool water.

It was a bright morning, and the boys, much refreshed by their night's rest and their breakfast, continued on toward the settlement, with a feeling that the tide of fortune had certainly turned and was coming their way.

Cache d'Or was not much of a town.

Besides the railroad-station, there was a hotel, a general store, and half a dozen saloons and gambling-establishments.

At that hour there was nothing doing in the saloons and gambling-dens, and the only signs of life anywhere visible was about the hotel.

In front of the hangout there were half a dozen horsemen, armed to the teeth and looking as though they had business on hand.

One of the armed men was holding a horse with an empty saddle, and it was plain that the party was waiting for one of their number who was in the hotel.

A moment after Lee and Chris caught sight of the warlike party the horsemen caught sight of them.

A few quick words were spoken, and three of the mounted men spurred at a gallop directly toward the two boys.

The lads came to a halt and waited until the horsemen drew rein in front of them.

"What're you two fellers doin' in these diggin's?" inquired one of the armed men roughly.

"We're not looking for trouble, mister, I can tell you that," Lee answered.

"Strangers?" went on the man, with a frown.

"Yes."

"Where from?"

"Texas, last; but from Nowhere, originally."

"Don't git too flip, bub. I'm deperty sher'f o' this county, sabe?"

"What of it?"

"Waal, we're lookin' fer road-agents thet hev been holdin' up miners between hyer an' Placerville."

"And you took us for road-agents, eh?" Lee laughed.

"Look here," he went on, and turned his pockets inside out. "If we were road-agents, we'd have something to show for it, wouldn't we? And if we were road-agents, we wouldn't be foolish enough to come right into town like this."

Two of the men gave a loud laugh, whirled their horses, and put back to the hotel, the third man following them.

An individual, who had every appearance of being the leader of the party, had hurried out and leaped into the saddle on the riderless horse.

"The gang is somewhere between here and Placerville, boys," said he; "an' we'll git 'em, in spite o' fate."

Then off across the railroad-track and up into the hills the party rode at a swinging gallop.

"Thet's Hank Bagsby, the sher'f," a freckle-faced,

tow-headed boy explained to Lee and Chris, as they came up. The boy had come out of the hotel and was standing on the platform that ran across the front of the building. "Mebby they'll git them road-agents an' mebbly they won't. Trampin' ties?" he asked, suddenly giving his attention to Lee and Chris.

"Sittin' down," young Maverick answered, as he dropped down on the platform.

"I want ter know!" chuckled the freckle-faced kid.

"How far is it to Placerville?" Lee queried.

"Twenty mile."

"What's the fare?"

"Twenty cases, round trip."

Chris thought of the dollar and a half he and Lee still had between them, and stifled a groan.

"Where does the stage pull out from?"

"From right hyer. This is the station, an' the stage is around behind the hotel now."

"When does it leave?"

"When the train from the West gits hyer."

"And when is that?"

"'N half an hour. Sim Eckford, the driver, is 'tending to his hosses now."

A yell from inside claimed the boy's attention, and he spun around and vanished.

"Twenty tollars!" whispered Chris. "Chimineddy, Lee! Haf ve got to valk?"

"No," answered Lee, getting up from the platform. "Let's go around and see if we can't persuade Sim Eckford to haul us for what we've got."

It was a forlorn hope, but the boys resolved to see what they could accomplish, and went around the corner of the hotel and made for the barn.

At the back of the barn stood the stage—a huge, lumbering vehicle, with a shelf at the rear, curtained with leather, for stowing away trunks and such baggage as could not be carried inside.

This leather-covered shelf was technically known as the "boot," but was large and roomy—empty.

Lee halted, parted the leather curtain, and looked inside the boot. An idea struck him.

Suppose Sim Eckford, the driver, did not happen to be charitably disposed?

Rather than run the risk of being refused a ride, Lee thought it would be as well for him and Chris to stow themselves away in the receptacle at the end of the coach.

Possibly no passengers for Placerville would arrive from the West, and, as there was only one man in the hotel to go, and he was traveling "light," mayhap the boot would not have to be used for the stowage of trunks.

In the barn the driver could be heard moving about and talking to his horses.

If anything was done, it would have to be done quickly.

Lee took a hasty glance around. The coast was clear, and he laid hold of Chris and boosted him into the boot almost before the Dutch boy had a chance to realize what his pard was up to.

After getting Chris in, Lee climbed in himself.

"Chee whiz!" murmured Chris; "dis iss a scheme for your life!"

"Hist!" Lee whispered, laying his hand over Chris Augenblick's mouth and smothering the laugh which the

boy was having all to himself. "There won't be anything funny in this if we're caught."

Chris hushed his laughter instantly, and both lads became breathlessly still in their cramped quarters.

Through holes in the leather curtain they were able to look out and see what was going on.

Presently Sim Eckford strode out, leading four horses. He gave a loud whistle, and a man came from the hotel and helped him put the horses to the coach.

While the hitching was going forward, the train from the West steamed in.

The position of the coach made it impossible for Lee to see whether any passengers arrived.

One man disembarked—a well-dressed, prosperous-looking man, carrying a small alligator-skin grip.

Was the well-dressed man going to Placerville? Lee's heart thumped against his ribs for an instant, but he breathed more freely when he saw that no baggage was taken off the baggage-car.

All the luggage the well-dressed man had was that small satchel, so, even if he did intend going to Placerville, the chances were that the boys would not be routed out of the boot.

The well-dressed man came across to the hotel and stood on the platform in front; and he was there when Sim Eckford drove the stage up and halted it to take on his load.

The man from the West, as Lee could now see, had a fine face and wore a full beard, snowy white and neatly trimmed.

"All aboard fer Placerville!" shouted Eckford. "Are you goin', podner?"

"Yes," answered the man on the platform.

"Any baggage?"

"Nothing but this," and the man held up his grip.

"Tumble in, then."

The man climbed inside, and barely was he settled when the second passenger came out of the hotel.

Both Lee and Chris had a good look at him, and instantly the boys started in surprise.

If Lee had not laid a firm hand on Chris Augenblick's arm the Teuton would have said something aloud in his excitement.

The man was Grimes!

Then it was that Lee reproached himself for not getting more information from the freckle-faced boy.

Had young Maverick known, before time for the stage to pull out, that Grimes was in the hotel, this trip to Placerville would not need to have been taken.

Now, however, it was too late; and, even while Lee was thinking the matter over, Sim Eckford had started out of town with his four-horse team at a run.

Riding in the boot was anything but pleasant, as the boys quickly discovered.

They were tossed up and down, banged together with stunning force, and more than once just barely escaped being thrown into the road.

But they stood the hardship cheerfully.

Grimes was almost within arm's reach of them! All they had to do was to stick out that rough twenty-mile ride, and then, unless Lee's ingenuity failed him, the contract would be recovered.

But important things were to happen before Placerville was reached, and the most important thing came to pass some five miles out of Cache d'Or, in a little

rocky pass that twisted in serpentine fashion through a ridge of timbered hills.

On rounding a sharp angle of the pass, Sim Eckford exploded an astounded oath and drew to a halt so suddenly that Lee and Chris shot head-first into the end of the stage-coach.

"Throw up your hands!" cried a stern voice. "We've got the bulge on you, Eckford! One move, and you're a dead man! While I and my pards are lifting the personal property of your passengers you'll have the kindness to kick the mail-sack into the road!"

Chris caught Lee's shoulder with both hands.

"Ach, du lieber!" he whispered, his cheeks blanching and his eyes bulging from his head. "Vat now, Lee?"

"A hold-up!" Lee whispered back. "Keep quiet, Chris! The road-agents that the sheriff and his men are out looking for have evaded capture and are going to go through the stage!"

A particularly important event was about to happen. The little alligator-skin grip was about to change hands, and so was Grimes' pocketbook, which not only contained a generous supply of greenbacks, but also that contract—the one Lee was so anxious to obtain.

CHAPTER X.

THE HOLD-UP.

The road-agents seemed to be particularly adept in their line of work. Their operations proceeded without a hitch, and up to a certain point were attended with the utmost success.

From the boot neither Lee nor Chris could see what was taking place forward, but they knew very well that one or two of the robbers held Sim Eckford, the driver, under their guns, while two of their pals rode briskly on to the coach, one on each side.

"Sorry to bother you, gentlemen," came the urbane voice of the leader of the gang; "but you'll have to come out here and give us a chance to take your valuables!"

"Is—is this here a hold-up?" faltered the voice of Abner Grimes.

"If it ain't, pardner," chuckled the highwayman, "it's a pretty fair imitation. Are you going to come out? I should be sorry to have you attempt to use your guns. That would mean death for one, or both, of you!"

"You've got the drop on us, and I suppose it would be worse than useless to fight," spoke up a quiet voice, a voice which was calm and collected, in spite of the trying ordeal through which its owner was passing. This voice, of course, must have belonged to the man from the West.

"That's sensible," said the leader of the gang approvingly. "Out with you, gentlemen! We can't give all day to this matter!"

By craning his neck, Lee could see Grimes and the other passenger descend from the coach. Grimes came first.

"Hands in the air!" cried the man who was assisting the leader to go through the passengers.

Up went the well-driller's hands.

The man from the West next disembarked.

"Beg pardon," said the leader, "but you've left your grip in the coach."

A quick, almost imperceptible, pallor swept into the passenger's face.

"It isn't possible you want that?" he muttered.

"It's more than possible! Bring it out and hand it to me."

The man from the West turned back, secured his satchel, and tossed it to the outlaw.

Lee could see plainly that he hated to part with that piece of luggage.

"Now, up with your hands!" commanded the leader, and the man from the West ranged himself alongside of Abner Grimes, holding his hands above his head.

"Tony," the leader continued, keeping his eyes and his guns on the two men in the road, but addressing his companion, "go through their clothes. Be quick about it!"

Tony flung from his saddle and began a deft and thorough search of the passenger's pockets.

While this was going forward Lee had an opportunity to take stock of the chief of the gang and of Tony.

The chief was tall and sat his horse, a big roan, with all the masterful ease of a cowboy.

He held two big six-shooters in his hands.

His face was not on view, being covered with a mask of buckskin through which his black, beadlike eyes glittered resolutely.

Tony was smaller than his chief, and also wore a mask of buckskin.

A watch and a roll of bills were removed from the person of the Western man and dropped into the satchel which the chief had hung from his saddle-bow.

As Tony turned to Grimes, Lee noticed that the well-dressed man lowered one of his hands toward his breast, as if by an unconscious movement.

Lee, intensely excited by the spectacle he was witnessing, paid little attention to this move on the part of the well-dressed man just then, although presently it was to recur to him.

"Gi'me that!" came an angry cry from Grimes as Tony removed a long, greasy-looking wallet from his coat pocket.

A derisive laugh came through the mouth-opening in Tony's mask.

"Take out the money, but leave the paper that's in thar!" persisted Grimes frantically. "Ye kin hev the money an' welcome, but I want the paper!"

"Look at the paper, Tony," commanded the chief.

Tony opened the wallet and looked.

"It's a contract for a deed," said Tony, and Lee's heart went thumpety-thump, and then sank like lead when he heard the chief say:

"Don't give it back to him. It may be something that we can realize money on."

"Nothin' else here, cap, aside from the wallet," observed Tony, completing his search through Grimes' pockets.

"Then drop the wallet into the grip, along with the watch and other truck, and we'll be hiking for the tall timber."

As Tony stepped to the side of his leader's horse and dropped the wallet into the open satchel, Lee saw the right hand of the well-dressed man pluck a revolver from the breast of his coat.

A shudder ran along the boy's nerves.

What was the well-dressed man going to do? Was he going to fight that gang, single-handed? It was the act of a madman! Right then and there Lee would have

given him his entire \$300 if he had had a good, serviceable revolver.

As the snap of the closing satchel echoed out sharply a shout of warning came from the men who were covering the driver of the stage.

This shout was followed by a crack! crack! crack! of an exploding weapon and a whistle of bullets in the air.

The shots were fired at the well-dressed man by the outlaws nearer the heads of the horses, and, wonderful to relate, not one of them did a particle of damage.

Tony stood between his leader and the two passengers, and the chief of the outlaws pushed his man aside.

"You've brought this on yourself!" shouted the leader of the gang, and would have used his revolvers had not the well-dressed man been too quick for him.

There came a sharp detonation, and a bullet leaped from the muzzle of the well-dressed man's revolver.

A cry of pain escaped the leader's lips, and he tossed up his hands, swayed, and pitched headlong from his saddle.

"Beat them off!" shouted the man from the West; "pull your guns and fight them off!"

The shout of the plucky passenger was drowned in a patter of hoofs and chorus of yells coming from up the pass.

"The sher'f!" cried one of the outlaws, standing at the horses' heads.

"Cut fer it!" whooped another of the robbers, at the same point. "The cap'n's knocked out an' we're done fer ef we don't hit the road!"

Then followed a minute of excitement, with half a dozen different things happening all at once.

The sheriff and his men swept nearer and nearer, and the two outlaws who had been covering Sim Eckford started down the pass, one of them firing toward the sheriff and his party, and the other blazing away at the well-dressed man and Grimes.

The well-driller had drawn a revolver from some place about his clothes, and was making ready to use it, when a bullet struck him, and he sank to his knees, and finally fell at the side of the outlaw leader.

Tony, meanwhile, had leaped at the captain's horse, had landed in the saddle, and was off at speed, firing promiscuously as he went.

Chris, in his excitement, had taken a viselike hold on Lee Maverick's arm.

Two bullets had torn their way through the leather curtain of the boot, and this, as the reader may suppose, had not tended to quiet the boys' nerves.

But the moment was close at hand for them to enact their part in the sanguinary drama.

Tony's horse, as will be remembered, had been left standing at the trail-side, while its rider dismounted to search the two passengers.

Familiar with the reports of firearms and scenes of commotion, the horse had stood stock-still while the mêlée was commencing, but when the rolling hoofs of the sheriff's posse was heard, and when the outlaws sought safety in flight, Tony's steed leaped to follow.

So close to the boot did the horse pass that Lee, every energy on the alert, thrust out his hand and caught the bridle.

The horse did not stop at once, nor did young Maverick let go his hold.

The result was that Lee was jerked clear of the boot and dragged Chris with him.

The Dutch boy was jolted and bruised, but he was too much excited to make any complaints.

Without a word, Lee clambered into the saddle, and Chris, in some manner, managed to get up behind him.

About all that young Maverick realized was that his contract was in the little alligator-skin grip, that the grip was hanging to the saddle of the outlaw leader's horse, that Tony had taken this horse, and that, if the contract was recovered, Tony was the man to be dealt with.

Thus thinking, young Maverick let the outlaw steed follow the bent of its own wild will and go plunging and dashing down the road.

"Halt!" roared the sheriff, from behind. "Halt, I say!"

But the sheriff might as well have tried to stop the wind from blowing as to stop Lee Maverick and Chris Augenblick.

Sping! Crackety-crack! crack! crack!

Leaden missiles whistled and sang all about the boys until the curve in the trail was turned, and then came a moment's respite.

"Hurt, Chris?" cried Lee.

"By shinks," answered the Teuton, between his clenched teeth, "I hafn't had time to find id out!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE FLUME.

When Lee and Chris got around the bend in the trail they expected certainly that they would see the fleeing outlaws in front of them, but in this they were disappointed.

Another bend of the crooked pass lay ahead, and the clipety-clip, clipety-clip of galloping horses came from beyond it.

"Vat ve goin' to do?" asked Chris. "Shace afder dose fellers?"

"Yes," answered Lee; "chase after 'em, and get that contract!"

At that moment the horse swerved sharply to the left and dashed into the brush.

"Dot ain'd der vay!" exclaimed Chris.

"Confound the brute!" muttered Lee, throwing himself back in the saddle and tugging at the lines. "He's got the bit in his teeth, and I can't turn him back into the road!"

The outlaw horse appeared to have a mind of its own, and in spite of all that Lee could do refused obstinately to return to the trail, but pushed up the steep side of the pass through the brush.

A point was reached where the chaparral broke away and gave the lads a view of the trail below.

As they looked downward they saw the sheriff and his posse whirling around the second bend, making a wild race after the outlaws.

"Cracky!" exclaimed young Maverick; "it's just as well, I guess, that this horse brought us in this direction. If the sheriff had caught us it's more than likely we'd have been pinched for being part of the road-agents' gang!"

"How's dot, Lee?"

"Don't you remember what happened in Cache d'Or this morning? Three of the sheriff's outfit rode up and questioned us. We convinced the three that we weren't

robbers then, but it would be a little harder for us to convince them this time."

"Meppy you're righdt, Lee. Anyway, id vas a goot t'ing dot der sheriff come along shust ven he dit. Od-dervise, dot olt feller vould haf been kilt so deadt as Grimes."

"As it is," returned young Maverick, "the sheriff is our only hope. If he recovers the satchel, as he probably will, I will have to go to him, prove that we had nothing to do with the outlaws, and that the paper in the satchel belongs to me."

"Ach, sooch a horse as dis vone iss!" grumbled Chris. "He don'd got as mooch sense as a moo-el. Oof he had acted righdt ve might haf ketched der feller mit der satchel ouselufs, und nod had any explanations to make. Py shinks! I——"

"Sh-h-h!" whispered young Maverick sharply.

"Vat id iss?" whispered Chris.

They had reached the top of the precipitous side of the pass, and before them stretched a small plateau, brush-covered and edged on the opposite side by a jagged fringe of hills.

"Look!" muttered Lee, and pointed.

Chris followed the finger of his friend with his eyes, and caught a glimpse of something flashing in and out among the mesquit-bushes.

"Iss id a man?" inquired Chris breathlessly.

"A man on a horse," answered Lee.

"Vone oof der oudlaws, yes?"

"I think so. In fact," and there was an exultant undertone in young Maverick's voice, "I am almost sure the fellow ahead is Tony!"

"Dot's too goot to be droo, Lee! For vy shouldt, id be Dony?"

"This horse we are riding belongs to Tony."

"Yah, I know dot."

"Isn't it more likely that Tony, having the plunder, turned from the trail and left his two comrades to gallop on and draw the sheriff after them?"

"Sure! I hadn't t'ought oof dot!"

"And isn't it more likely that this horse, through instinct, or brute sense, or whatever else you want to call it, turned and followed its master?"

Chris wanted to let off a triumphant yell, but stopped himself so effectually that the yell became merely a smothered gurgle.

"You vas vone oof dose crackerchacks, Lee!" averred the Teuton. "Yah, so helup me, you know more in a year as I know in a minid!"

Chris thought he was giving young Maverick a compliment, and the latter did not set his Dutch pard right. During the time the boys were having this exchange of opinion Tony's horse had been making excellent time in the track of its owner.

Finally, Tony heard the pursuit, and quickened the pace of his own horse.

He probably thought that his ruse had failed, and that part of the sheriff's posse was chasing him while the other part kept on after his companions.

But for some reason which the boys could not guess, at that moment, Tony's mount made very poor time.

When the outlaw reached the farther side of the plateau and struck in among the ragged uplifts that bordered the level stretch Lee and Chris were not over an eighth of a mile behind.

As pursued and pursuers hurried on, the latter caught

a good look at Tony, and discovered the secret of his slow progress.

His horse was bleeding in the foreleg, evidently from a bullet-wound, and had gone lame.

"Ve'll ged him!" murmured Chris; "py shinks, ve'll ged him!"

But Lee wasn't so sanguine. The outlaw was armed, and all young Maverick and young Augenblick had between them was Blitzenmeister, and Blitzenmeister was good only to use as a club.

Chris could have loaded up the old blow-gun if he had had any good powder, but his powder had got wet in the river back in the vicinity of Twin Buttes, and had been cast away.

Lee, however, did not think of what he and Chris should do when they overhauled Tony; all he did then was to bend every effort upon overtaking the outlaw. After that he would leave to fate whatever was to happen.

"Look—look! Py chimeneddy! Vat you t'ink he's doing?"

Suddenly across the course the boys were traveling, and some little distance ahead, a huge scaffolding up-reared itself.

The scaffolding supported a contrivance which looked like a huge box a dozen feet high, a dozen in width, and so long that they could see neither the beginning nor the end of it.

"Vat kindt oof a t'ing iss id, Lee?" queried the astonished Chris.

"It's a flume," answered Lee.

"Much opliged! I know more yet as I dit pefore! Dere iss vater leaking down. A rifer—a rifer in der air, by chiminy!"

"You've struck it, Chris. It's a river in the air, and carries water from the top of the mountains to some placer-mine where hydraulic mining is going on."

"But dot feller! Vat der tickens iss he goin' oop to der rifer for?"

Tony, as both lads could see, had abandoned his wounded horse and was climbing a rough ladder which led to the big water-trough.

Secured about his waist by his belt, which passed through the handle, was the alligator-skin grip.

"I don't know what he's going up there for, Chris," said Lee, "but I'm going after him!"

"Dat's me, too! I'll go mit you."

"No; you stay down here, and keep your lamps peeled."

Chris was visibly disappointed as the horse was drawn to a halt and young Maverick flung himself from the saddle and rushed to the foot of the rude ladder.

The wounded horse, which was standing near, gave a loud whinny at the approach of the second animal. Tony's mount answered, and the climbing outlaw, half-way up the flume, halted and gazed downward.

He saw Lee just laying hold of the bottom round of the ladder.

"Keep off!" yelled Tony. "Git away from thet ladder, or I'll kill ye!"

"Try some monkey-doodle pitzness!" bawled Chris, jerking Blitzenmeister out of his coat and sighting it upward over his left arm, which he crooked in front of his face; "und I'll plow you indo more as a million biees! Go on oop, Lee! Ged dot satchel. You can

depent on me, for I peen der best sharpshooder in a tozen Shtates!"

Chris was working a great big bluff.

To Tony the Dutch boy looked particularly dangerous, sighting along the barrel of his huge firearm. And, naturally, Tony could not tell that Blitzenmeister was as useless as a wooden gun.

The outlaw made no attempt to draw and fire at Lee, but continued on up the ladder with all the agility of a squirrel.

When he reached the top of the flume he stepped onto a cross-piece and whirled about.

Chris still had Blitzenmeister trained on him.

"Make some moves to ged away," yelled Chris, "und I pull der drigger! Dis gun can carry a gouple oof miles und sink an iron-clad! Oof you don't pelieve id, shust try to make my pard some droubles, und you'll nefer life to ged over id!"

In his zeal, young Maverick was a little afraid that Chris Augenblick would overdo the thing.

The outlaw, however, seemed to be properly intimidated.

He did not develop a weapon, but cast a shifty look toward the ground on the opposite side of the flume. At last his eyes returned to young Maverick, who was balancing himself upon the edge of the big trough.

At every dozen feet the flume was spanned by a girder, these braces keeping its sides from spreading beneath the pressure of the foaming current which raced through it down the mountain to the placerings.

"What are you kids chasin' me for?" demanded Tony, a dare-devil expression crossing his face as he put the question.

"We're after that satchel!" replied Lee firmly.

"This satchel, eh?" Tony returned, slowly unbuckling his belt and catching the grip by the handle. "What business have you got with this satchel?"

"It's stolen, and we're going to return it to its owners."

"How do you know it's stolen?"

"We saw the whole job."

"You? Why, you wasn't in thet coach!"

"Not in the coach——"

"Didn't you ride up with the sheriff?"

"No. We were in the boot."

"The boot?"

"Yes; stealing a ride to Placerville."

A look of understanding broke over the outlaw's face.

"An' ye're tryin' ter help the sheriff git back this here satchel, hey?"

"That's it."

"Keep your mouth shut and I'll give you a hundred to give up this job you're tryin' to put through. A hundred in cold cash, d'ye hear?"

"No!" answered Lee angrily. "Give me that satchel!"

"Well, ef ye mean it, I reckon I kain't prevent ye from takin' the grip away."

With the satchel in his hand, Tony stepped toward young Maverick.

Lee saw that the outlaw took a position which placed him—Lee—between Chris Augenblick's pointed pistol and its original target; but movements on top of the flume were restricted to rather a narrow space, and there was no other way in which Tony could hand over the grip.

"Mind yer eye, Nibbs!" shouted Tony suddenly.

Then, in a twinkling, the satchel was tossed over the opposite side of the flume.

A hoarsely triumphant laugh escaped from Tony.

"Ketch a weasel asleep, kid!" he taunted. "Down below now, and kerry my respects to yer Dutch pal!"

Instantly he struck out at young Maverick with his right fist.

Had the fist reached its mark Lee would have been knocked off his feet and tumbled to the ground, twenty yards beneath.

But young Maverick dodged.

Tony's right cut through the air, and its failure to land caused him to lose his balance and topple over. Flinging out his arms, he caught young Maverick, and both dropped into the racing current of the flume!

CHAPTER XII.

UNDER ARREST.

Lee had been on his guard from the instant Tony had shouted to some one whom he called Nibbs and had hurled the satchel.

But for young Maverick to be on his guard was one thing, and to prevent the mishap which landed him in the churning flood with the road-agent, was another.

In a twinkling young Maverick, clutched in the frantic embrace of the outlaw, was shooting down the huge trough.

It was hardly necessary for either of the two to swim, since the swiftness of the current kept them both at the surface, and so near the stout beams which crossed the flume that they were in imminent danger of striking their heads and having their brains dashed out.

Clenching his teeth, young Maverick put forth every ounce of strength and tried to free himself of his foe.

Tony, however, held to him like a leech.

Not a word was spoken, and in grim silence the man and the boy struggled and were hustled along.

At last, after a period which seemed of hours' duration to Lee, but which, in reality, footed up but so many seconds, a bend in the flume threw them against the outside wall.

Fortunately for Lee, the outlaw was next to the wall, and struck the heavy planks with his head.

A gurgling sigh came from the man, his hands fell limply from their hold on Lee's body, and he curled up and shot onward.

Young Maverick, quick to take advantage of the brief stay in their mad race, gripped one of the cross-beams.

His first attempt was a failure, and he was pulled away with a jerk which well nigh wrenched his arms out of their sockets.

Again he tried, and this time he was successful.

For the fraction of a second he held himself; then slowly drew himself out of the water, and perched, breathless and dizzy, on the edge of the flume.

Far along the gleaming track of water he looked, but could see nothing of the outlaw.

Was he dead? Had that blow stunned him, and would he be drowned in the fierce tide?

Lee shuddered.

Yet he was not long in withdrawing his attention from Tony and centering it upon matters which more immediately concerned him.

The flinging of the satchel to the ground by the out-

law and his call to some one by the name of Nibbs gave young Maverick a good deal of worry.

Was there a rendezvous of the outlaws at some place near where Tony had climbed to the top of the flume?

Had Tony mounted to his elevated position for the purpose of locating some other member or members of the gang? And had he, in that shifty look around just before hurling the satchel, discovered a comrade by the name of Nibbs?

All this would possibly never be fully known, but if there was any truth at all in Lee's surmises Chris Augenblick must at that moment be in considerable peril himself.

Raising himself erect, young Maverick looked groundward, far up the flume toward the place where he and Tony had dropped into the water.

He could see nothing. There was no telling how far he and Tony had come in their wild plunge down the trough.

After scanning the rocks and the chaparral for a brief space, Lee climbed down to the ground and set out on the return trail at a run.

It took him half an hour to cover the distance which he and Tony had shot over in half a minute or more.

Then, recognizing the land-marks, he found himself at the place where he had dismounted and climbed up the trestle.

But Chris was not there, nor was Tony's horse anywhere in evidence.

The wounded bronco had likewise disappeared, a trail of blood showing the course the animal had taken.

Lee was greatly alarmed, but smothered the foreboding at his heart and gave a look for the satchel.

He did not expect to find the grip, so he was not disappointed when his search proved unavailing.

Thinking the trail of blood left by the horse might lead him in some way to the place where Chris was, Lee set out to follow.

At the end of a quarter of a mile he came upon the horse, dead, in the bushes, a bullet-hole in its head.

The horse was stripped of saddle and bridle—a fact which served to confirm Lee's worst fears.

Some of Tony's pals had been at hand, had secured the satchel, possibly had taken Chris a prisoner, and had gone off into the hills, taking the captain's horse with them.

The wounded animal, proving a hindrance to rapid flight, had been shot and left where Lee had found it.

Dripping wet, tired, and nearer discouragement than he had ever come, young Maverick sat down on a boulder and bent his head in his hands, trying to think what he should do next.

With startling abruptness, he was aroused from his reflections by a gruff voice.

"Reckon ye'll admit ye're one o' them road-agents now, kid?"

Lee looked up.

In front of him stood the man who, with two comrades, had accosted him and Chris that morning when they had tramped ties into Cache d'Or.

The man wore a grim smile.

Behind him were the same two men who had been at his side earlier in the day—the men who had laughed at their comrade's suspicions concerning the lads.

"No!" cried Lee, starting up; "I won't admit anything! I don't belong to that gang!"

"Easy, kid," said one of the others. "It won't do ye any good ter lie about it."

"I'm telling you the truth," averred Lee.

"Ye wasn't on thet stage, an' ye showed up at the time the robbers begun ter fight with Hapgood an' the other man."

"Yes; I was on the stage, and so was that chum of mine, the Dutch boy."

"Whar was ye?"

"In the boot!"

A derisive laugh went up from all three.

"Ye're our prisoner, bub," said the first of the three. "Bring up the horses," he added to one of his comrades, "an' we'll ride back ter meet Bagsby, an' see what kind er luck he's had."

One of the men pushed back into the bushes.

"Been in swimmin' with yer clo's on, ain't ye?" said the leader of the trio jocularly.

"I went down the flume with one of the robbers," explained Lee.

But again he was accorded a laugh of derision, and it was apparent that the deputies were not inclined to believe anything he said.

The man came up with the horses, and Lee, after he had been searched for weapons, was given a handkerchief to tie around his head, his hat having gone down the flume with Tony.

"Git up behind me, youngster," said the leader of the detachment.

"I won't leave here until I find Chris!" declared young Maverick.

"I think ye will! Put him up behind me, Darrell."

Although he protested, young Maverick was lifted by the other two men to the cantle of the leader's horse.

"Jest remember," said the man, "thet ye're under arrest. Be peaceable, an' we'll git along all right; but try ter make a break, an' ye'll be deader'n yer chief is this hyer minit!"

"Was the chief of the gang killed?"

"I reckon."

"By the man who lost the satchel?"

"Nary. Mr. Hapgood wounded him, but arter Culver—he's the chief o' the gang, as ye know blame well—arter Culver drapped he raised himself an' tried ter put a bullet through Bagsby as we dashed past, but Bagsby was too quick for Culver an' snuffed his light."

"Twere a purty shot, Sinclair," said Darrell. "I never seen a purtier shot. Did you, Hammond?"

Darrell appealed to his comrade, and the latter applauded Bagsby's quickness and marksmanship.

Back to the trail they made their way, and there they met Bagsby, the sheriff, and the remaining three men of the posse, one of the three having his arm bandaged and suspended in a sling from his neck.

"No luck?" inquired Sinclair.

"Not a cent's worth!" growled the sheriff. "Who ye picked up?"

"One o' the kids I was tellin' ye of."

"Does he admit bein' one o' the gang?"

"No; I don't admit it," spoke up Lee.

"He don't hev ter admit it, Bagsby," grunted Sinclair; "we cotched him right whar one o' the agents had shot a hoss. The hoss must hev belonged ter him——"

"It didn't belong to me," persisted young Maverick.

"Thet's enough!" said Bagsby impatiently. "Ye'll hev

a chance ter prove what ye are, kid, when we git ter Placerville."

"I don't want to go to Placerville until I do something to find out what's become of my friend."

"It don't make no diff'rence what ye want ter do!" snapped the sheriff. "Ef I say go, ye go! Which is jest what I do say. The gang got off with the pickin's, but we've got Culver, an' I don't opine the varmints'll recover from the loss o' their leader. We'll hev ter be satisfied. Ride, boys!"

Immediately the horses were put to the gallop.

Lee learned as they rode along that the dead leader of the gang had been loaded into the stage and sent on to Placerville, together with the plucky Mr. Hapgood, who was the man from the West, and the wounded Grimes.

The injury to Grimes, as Lee also learned, was serious, but not mortal.

The last ten miles of the Placerville trail was a terrific climb up the mountain.

Here and there the road wound, hugging precipitous cliffs and traversing shelflike stretches so narrow that Lee wondered how the stage ever managed to cover the course.

Now and again they caught sight of a narrow-gage railroad-track, jumping a dizzy gully and hanging in mid-air like a couple of glistening threads.

"What's that?" Lee inquired of Sinclair, with whom he was riding.

"What's which?"

Young Maverick pointed to the railway-track.

"Kain't ye tell a railroad when ye see it?" returned the deputy.

"Yes; but I can't tell where it goes."

"It goes ter the top o' the mounting, an' down ter Pimaville, whar it connects with the main east an' west line. A narrer-gage, thet's what it is, fifty miles long an' down hill all the way. It 'u'd make yer h'ar raise ter ride on thet same line, young feller. A good many folks take the stage ter Cache d'Or—which trail is bad enough—rather than ter risk their precious necks on the P. & P. Thet road is so blame crooked that it takes three hours fer the train ter git from Placerville ter Pimaville; an' thar are so many curves on the line thet a feller on the back platform o' the rear car kin toss a biscuit ter the engineer in the cab. Fact. I seen it done."

Two hours were required for the horsemen to cover the ten up-and-down miles, and Lee, at the command of Bagsby, told how he and Chris had ridden out of Cache d'Or in the boot of the stage, had grabbed a horse during the fight in the pass, and had trailed after the robbers; also, the boy told of the struggle on the flume, and the ride down it in the racing waters.

His story was not believed, the sheriff and his men all pronouncing the yarn too big to be swallowed.

"Ye couldn't take a ride down thet flume an' live," declared Bagsby. "When ye git ready ter tell me the truth about what happened ter ye I'll listen, but don't try ter give me any such cock-an'-bull story as thet 'ere!"

At last Placerville was reached, very close to the top of the mountain.

Young Maverick had just time to observe that it was a pretty good-sized settlement, on a par with several other mining-towns which he had seen, and was hurried off to a log building which was used as a jail.

The one room which the jail contained had a couple of barred windows, a bench, and a cot.

Utterly exhausted, Lee threw himself down on the cot where, in spite of the discomfort of wet clothes, he fell into a sound sleep.

Two or three hours passed, and the boy was awakened by some one shaking him.

Sitting up on the cot, he saw that there were three men in the room; one was Bagsby, the other was Hapgood, and the third was a deputy in charge of the jail, the latter carrying a tray of dishes.

"Sorry ter shake ye so hard, kid," said the sheriff, "but ye was sleepin' like a house afire. We fetched ye some chuck. Hungry?"

"I should say so!" exclaimed Lee, remembering that the last meal he had eaten had been made off crackers, cheese, and gingersnaps quite early in the day.

There was something which surprised young Maverick, and that was the kindly manner in which Bagsby addressed him.

The sheriff was carrying himself with more affability toward his prisoner, and the latter wondered what had happened.

"What did ye say yer name was?" the sheriff asked, as Lee got up and stretched his limbs.

"I didn't say," answered Lee, "but it's Maverick, if you're anxious to know."

"Maverick? What fer kind of a name is thet 'ere?" the sheriff queried incredulously.

"It's the only one I got—or, rather, the only one I know anything about," and Lee started toward the bench where the deputy had set the tray of dishes.

The sheriff cast an expressive glance at Hapgood—a suspicious glance, which Lee could not help but notice.

Mr. Hapgood, however, did not seem to pay any attention to the look.

Stepping over to Lee, he held out his hand.

"I'm glad to meet you, Maverick," said he; "my name is Hapgood. Mr. Bagsby here has been telling me your story, as you gave it to him on the way up the mountain awhile ago."

"I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Hapgood," said Lee. "You made a plucky fight to save that alligator-hide grip, and I'm sorry you didn't get it back."

"From what I hear," answered Mr. Hapgood, "you made another pretty good fight for it yourself, and I'm obliged to you."

"That's all right," answered Lee. "You evidently take more stock in that story of mine than the sheriff does."

"The sheriff, I think, has changed his mind."

"What caused him to do that?"

"An hour ago word was telephoned up here from the diggings down below."

"What was that?" queried Lee, growing interested in a moment.

"A body was taken out of the flume at the camp of Hilbert & Hapgood."

"Tony's!"

"That's right. The body was badly mutilated, but it was recognized as Tony Percival's. Tony was one of the road-agents. You had a narrow escape, young man—a mighty narrow escape."

"It was close enough."

"You did not get the satchel back, but I shall never

forget that you risked your life in trying to do so," Mr. Hapgood went on, evidencing considerable feeling.

"You believe all that I told Mr. Bagsby, then?"

"Every word."

"Then I wish you'd have some one go out and look for my chum, Chris Augenblick——"

"I have already telephoned down to the camp to send out men looking for your friend."

That was thoughtful of Hapgood, and Lee caught his hand and shook it again.

"I'm afraid the road-agents made off with Chris," said Lee, "and either made a prisoner of him, or—or—killed him."

The last two words came hard, for Lee had learned to think a good deal of the Dutch boy in the short time they had been together. If Chris Augenblick's life had been sacrificed, it was while helping Lee to recover his rights. This was something young Maverick could not forget.

Mr. Hapgood was silent for a moment, looking at Lee's rent and water-soaked apparel with a kindly eye.

"Bagsby also told me something of the plight you were in," went on Mr. Hapgood, "and I had him get another outfit for you."

"I haven't any money with which to pay you——" Lee began, overwhelmed at this unexpected kindness.

"I consider myself repaid already," interrupted the other. "I'm a man who never forgets a service. If I can do anything to help you and your friend I want you to command me."

Mr. Hapgood nodded his head toward the sheriff, and the latter stepped to the door and brought in a large bundle, which he laid on the cot.

"Your arrest, of course," proceeded Mr. Hapgood, "was all a mistake—possibly a natural mistake, under the circumstances—but as soon as you finish your meal and get into your other outfit you are to go free." Mr. Hapgood passed to the door, and paused there a moment. "And when you are at liberty," he added, "I would like you to call on me at the Hotel Grande."

Thereupon he nodded and passed out of the jail.

Lee looked after him, and then switched his eyes blankly to the sheriff's face.

Bagsby grinned and gave a knowing wink.

"He's one o' the best-hearted men in the mountings, Maverick," said the sheriff. "You're in luck—don't forget that fer a minit. Hapgood's rich—owns more mines than any one in these parts. He's stuck on you, I kin see that. He'll offer ye somethin', an' you take my advice—don't turn it down!"

With that the sheriff went out, followed by the jailer, and left the door of the prison unsecured.

CHAPTER XIII.

CHRIS BRINGS STARTLING NEWS.

The Hotel Grande had a high-strung name, but it was anything but a high-strung affair.

It was constructed of boards and a kind of shingles known in the Southwest as "shakes."

It was one story in height, and the office and the bar-room were rolled into one.

On the wall of the office was a sign, "No shootin' aloud," and Lee, standing in front of the sign while waiting for Mr. Hapgood to present himself, wondered

how any gun-fanner was going to shoot without doing it "aloud."

Bagsby had used good judgment in securing Lee's outfit. The clothes fitted fairly well, and showed off the muscular form of young Maverick with decided advantage.

Lee was still looking at the sign when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"You look a hundred per cent. better, Maverick," came the hearty voice of Hapgood; "and I suppose you feel the same?"

"It's a cinch that I do," answered Lee. "I'd be myself now if my Dutch pard was only here, and if——"

He paused abruptly.

He was going to add, "and if I had that contract safe inside the pocket of this new coat of mine."

"If what?" queried Hapgood, his glance resting on the boy's handsome face.

"I'll tell you," said Lee. "I'm not entitled to all this kindness on your part, Mr. Hapgood, and when I'm able I'll pay you back for this outfit of clothes."

"I'm the best judge as to whether you're entitled to the kindness or not."

"You don't know everything. There's a little of my story which the sheriff didn't know, and you haven't heard much except what he told you."

Mr. Hapgood turned and led Lee toward a corner, where there were a couple of chairs. "Now," he went on, when they were comfortably seated, "if you want to tell me more, go ahead."

Thereupon young Maverick told about the vicissitudes which had befallen that contract for a deed given by old Bill Tetly.

This brought up the matter of the oil-land, and Lee went into that subject and exhausted it pretty thoroughly.

The boy, however, said nothing about himself, nor did Hapgood press him on that point, but listened with deepest interest to all that was said.

"You've had a hard rub," was his comment when Lee had finished.

"It takes the hard rubs to polish a fellow off and show what he's worth," said Lee. "As far as I'm concerned, I can stand the hard knocks, but what worries me is Chris. I don't want him to suffer on account of me——"

"He sha'n't suffer," interrupted Mr. Hapgood. "He'll be found, no doubt of that."

"I hope so," said Lee. "If he is, and if I'm ever lucky enough to get back that contract, and make anything out of that oil-land, you can bet that Chris gets a share of the rake-off."

"I like that!" exclaimed Mr. Hapgood. "Always stand by your friends, my lad."

"If the sheriff will go with me, I'd like to go out right away and have a look for my pard."

"The sheriff and his deputies are out looking for your friend now."

"You sent them?"

"I suggested that they go, and they were only too ready to heed the suggestion."

"You are a brick, Mr. Hapgood!" exclaimed Lee, with feeling.

"And if you want to go, Maverick, I'll see that you're fitted out with a horse to-morrow. You couldn't do much now—you see, it's night."

Even as Mr. Hapgood spoke a man went through the room lighting the swinging oil-lamps.

"Well," remarked Lee, satisfied that everything was being done to find Chris that could be done, "you know now that the reason I chased after that grip was in order to get back my contract."

"If you had recovered the satchel you would have returned it to me?"

"Certainly!"

"Then I consider that I am still indebted to you. Aside from your contract, that satchel contained a large sum of money and some valuable options on mining-property. If the grip is never recovered I will lose an immense sum. But," and the mine-owner gave a deprecatory wave of his hand, "we'll let that go for the present. Abner Grimes is in the hospital here, and will be for several weeks. There will be time enough to deal with him later. Just now I'm thinking that we both want that satchel of mine, and it will stand us in hand to work together and get it back. But little can be done until morning. Suppose we let our plans slide and talk matters over at breakfast? • Maybe some plan of action will occur to us overnight."

"I'll do a lot of hard thinking, anyhow," said Lee, as he parted from the mine-owner.

Young Maverick did not put in a very good night; he did so much hard thinking that he kept himself awake.

He was out of his bunk long before the breakfast hour, and when Mr. Hapgood presented himself they went into the dining-room together.

"The sheriff was out until long past midnight," said the mine-owner, "and he could not learn anything about your friend."

"Wasn't there any news from your camp?"

There was deep anxiety in Lee's voice as he put the question.

"I was just over to my office, using the telephone," said Mr. Hapgood, "and they have seen nothing of the young man."

Lee ate his meal in silence. He had thought of nothing during the night, and had no plan to present. Mr. Hapgood acknowledged that he, also, had failed to think of anything that would help in the search for the alligator-skin grip.

About the only thing to do was to start men out through the mountains looking for the road-agents.

"I had thought," remarked the mine-owner, "that I could make an offer to the thieves, telling them to retain the money in the satchel and return the papers, but there is no way to get such a message to the rascals."

They were about half through with their breakfast when a whistle was heard from the direction of the railroad-station.

"That's the train starting for Pimaville," observed Mr. Hapgood.

Lee did not seem to hear, for his mind was on other matters.

An hour later, as he and Mr. Hapgood were standing in front of the hotel, some one darted around the corner of the building and lurched heavily against young Maverick, clutching him about the shoulders.

"Id's Lee! By shinks, id's Lee!"

"Chris!" shouted young Maverick. "Is it you? Is it really you?"

"Yah, I t'ink so! I don'd know; meppy id vas somepody else, aber py chimineddy——"

Young Maverick, overjoyed at the sight of his chum, pulled him over to a chair and forced him down into it.

Chris was a sorry-looking sight.

His clothing was all but torn off of him and his hands and face were scratched with the thorns and briars of the chaparral.

All he seemed able to do was to hang to Lee with both hands, and all he seemed able to say was: "I t'ought you vas gone oop der shpout, yah, so helup me!"

"Where have you been, Chris?" Lee kept asking him.

"Efery place und vone oder, doo odder places besides. Oh, I t'ought you vas gone oop der shpout, I t'ought you vas——"

"Who got that satchel which Tony threw from the flume?"

"Anodder feller picked him oop shust as I run to ged holt of him, und den der odder feller shaced me, und I run der voods in und got away. Den der odder feller vent back und got der odder horse und shot him in der voods, und I followed dot feller, und dot's vot I peen doing—follering dot feller. He put der satchel in a pag und he came to dis town——"

"To Placerville?"

Mr. Hapgood was a silent, but interested, listener.

"Yah, dot's id. Id vas in der nighdt. He vent to a house, und I vaited by der place, und ven he come oudt dis morning dere vas somepody mit him—who you t'ink?"

"Give it up, Chris."

"Cheff Chirou!"

"Jeff Girou!" cried Lee.

"Jeff Girou!" echoed Mr. Hapgood; but young Maverick did not notice the excitement which suddenly took possession of the mining man.

"Yah; dose fellers bot' come oudt oof dot house, und dey come togedder, und vent by der drain, und got on, und I got on—for der feller mit Chirou had dot pag mit der satchel in id. I vas goin' to foller him, you bed my life; but vat you dink?" Chris let off a wail. "I had no money do pay my fare, und der plamed conductor droo me der drain off und——"

At that point Mr. Hapgood caught Lee by the arm.

"If they're on the train, Maverick, we may be able to stop them!" he exclaimed.

"Is there a telegraph-line running down the mountain?"

"Yes."

"And is there a town between Placerville and Pimaville?"

"Yes; two of them—Vulture and Grubstake."

"You stay here, Chris," said Lee. "Go in and get something to eat——"

"I haf no money!"

"Tell them to charge it to me," said Mr. Hapgood. The proprietor of the Hotel Grande showed himself at that moment. "Jasper, take that German boy in and give him the best you've got," the mining man added, addressing the proprietor of the hangout; "I'll stand the damage."

"All right, Mr. Hapgood," replied Jasper.

Thereupon Lee and Mr. Hapgood started for the railway-station.

It was not a great distance away, and they hurried in and made for the telegraph-operator's window.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Hapgood?" queried the operator, coming instantly to the window.

Everybody knew the mining man in that town.

"What time is the morning train due at Vulture?"

"At eight-thirty."

"It's nine now," muttered Mr. Hapgood, looking at his watch. "The train must be between Vulture and Grubstake. Hand me a blank, quick! I want to send a message."

"You can leave the message, Mr. Hapgood," said the operator, "but I can't tell when I shall be able to send it."

"Why not?"

"The wires are down."

"Down?" echoed the mining man blankly.

"Yes, sir. I think they've been cut by some of these here road-agents the sheriff has been having trouble with. You know, there was a hold-up on the Cache d'Or trail yesterday, and——"

"Get out a special," suggested Lee; "we can follow up the train on an engine."

"There's only one engine on the whole line," returned the operator, "and that is hauling the passenger. All we've got is a hand-car——"

"Where's that?" asked Lee. "We can use the hand-car."

"What?" gasped the operator.

"It's down grade all the way to Pimaville, isn't it?" said Lee.

"Yes, but——"

"The hand-car will take us. We'll overhaul the passenger and get our men. It's the only way, Mr. Hapgood."

Young Maverick spun around on his heel and dashed out of the station, Mr. Hapgood and the operator tight at his heels.

Lee saw the hand-car, and began pulling it out on the main track.

The car was equipped with a couple of brakes, but had no machinery to propel it.

"But you don't understand, young man," the telegraph-operator cried out. "It's madness to try to follow the passenger on that hand-car!"

"I don't see it," answered Lee, his eyes passing along the level stretch of track in front of the depot and pausing at the point where the rails bent downward and began the dip toward Pimaville.

"It's a three and one-half per cent. grade all the way," went on the operator.

"There are two brakes on the car," young Maverick answered.

"The brakes wouldn't save you! You'd go off a curve and land a thousand feet down in some cañon!"

"It's make or break!" said Lee, through his teeth. "Is there a clear track ahead?"

"The only thing in the way is the passenger-train."

"Good enough!"

Lee began pushing the hand-car toward the incline.

"You're the stuff, Maverick!" said Mr. Hapgood. "I'll make the ride with you and man one of the brakes."

"It's suicide, Mr. Hapgood!" the operator said, following them until the bend in the track was reached.

Without pausing to answer, young Maverick leaped onto the car and manned the forward brake.

"Nothing under Heaven will save your lives if you persist in this mad attempt!" the operator went on.

"I know a man who went down the track clear to

Pimaville," said Mr. Hapgood. "He got through all right."

"And he said he wouldn't make the same trip again if some one gave him a million dollars to do it!"

That was the operator's last argument.

A second more and Mr. Hapgood was aboard and gripping the rear brake.

Slowly the hand-car started, and the two adventurous passengers were off on their perilous ride.

CHAPTER XIV.

A THRILLING RIDE.

Had Lee Maverick understood the fearful nature of the dangers he and Hapgood were to face in that awful coast down the mountain, it is possible he would have drawn back, even though he knew that the overhauling of the passenger-train and the recovery of his contract from Girou and the road-agent meant a fortune to him. But he could not conceive that the perils were anything except those which a stout heart might easily meet and vanquish.

Hapgood had been over the road many times on the passenger-train, but the terrors of the trip were more than quadrupled when made on a small, open hand-car, with nothing between the car and destruction save a couple of brakes.

It was a hair-raising experience, a neck-and-neck ride with death, and the desperate nature of it was made manifest to both passengers very soon after the hand-car began its downward plunge.

A curve was before them, and, although they swept around it with the car well in hand, the flanges of the wheels were thrown outward against the rails with a shrieking grind.

"We'll have to look out for these curves, Maverick!" shouted Hapgood, from the rear seat. "If we don't use our brakes before we strike them we're liable to go kiting over into some cañon!"

"We haven't struck our gait, yet, Mr. Hapgood!" Lee replied. "Time enough to talk of slowing up for curves when we begin to reel off a mile or more to the minute!"

With terrifying quickness the gait increased, and suddenly a new and unlooked-for danger threatened.

While skirting the base of an overhanging cliff, with hundreds of feet of wall stretching up above them on the right and below them on the left, a huge boulder became loosened, fell, and they shot under it just in the very nick of time. It grazed the rear end of the car, called forth a frantic yell from Hapgood, crashed against the ledge which supported the road-bed, and went booming down into the gorge.

Lee was appalled at the narrowness with which a catastrophe had been averted.

He flung a look behind him at his companion, and saw that Hapgood's face was white as death and his teeth tightly clenched.

"Do things like that often happen?" young Maverick asked.

"Often," answered the mining man; "the passenger-train jars the boulders loose, and down they come. But I didn't think this hand-car would jolt a stone of that size out of the wall!"

"The passenger-train must have loosened it, and it

was our luck to have it fall just while we were underneath. If——"

"Bear down, Maverick—bear down!" cried Hapgood. "There's a tunnel ahead!"

A black hole in the mountainside loomed suddenly in front.

Lee couldn't see why it was necessary to slacken up while going through the tunnel, but he "bore down."

The speed slackened perceptibly, but, nevertheless, the car swept into the blackness as though winged; then, after a fraction of a second, as it seemed, out they flew into what looked like the airy void of space.

"We're gone!" thought Lee, and gulped down a lump in his throat and clutched the brake-lever like grim death.

But they were not gone, for from beneath came the ring of steel on steel, proving that the wheels still stayed with the track.

An abyss lay before them at the end of the tunnel—a gash spanned by a trestle which resembled spider-work. The car, as though impelled by some Satanic instinct, appeared to quicken its speed and charge, whipping across the gulf in half a breath.

"Vulture!" cried Hapgood.

Young Maverick became aware that they were passing a cluster of houses, and then down, still down, heading straight for another gorge, with the seeming intention of leaping over, but at the last moment swerving sideways, with a sickening lurch, and whizzing around an unseen curve.

Then, in good earnest, they were under way.

The air whistled past the ears of the travelers and lost itself in the ragged uplifts that lay behind.

They thundered into tunnels, crashed over bridges, raced like fiends at what appeared to be gigantic walls, only to find some unexpected opening and go hurling like mad down a straight slope.

It was a good deal like riding on the tail of a comet, or astride a flash of lightning.

Suddenly they darted into a second small cluster of houses and out again.

"This must be Grubstake!" Lee called over his shoulder.

"Yes!" shouted Hapgood. "We've got to look out for the train now! If we jammed into the rear of the train, full tilt, we'd go to flinders!"

"We'll watch out for that! Talk about sending a telegram! Why, Mr. Hapgood, we could beat a telegram to Pimaville!"

A moment more and they heard a whistle ahead, around a bend.

"The train—the train!" exclaimed Hapgood, throwing himself on the lever-brake.

Young Maverick also applied all his strength to the lever to which he was holding.

To such good purpose did they work that when they rounded the bend they came down on the rear car of the train with a jolt that did but little damage.

In descending the mountain the locomotive was obliged to hold back along every foot of the way, so that a train did not go down very much faster than it went up.

"Thank Heaven, we're done with that ride!" cried Hapgood, in a tone of the utmost relief. "Money couldn't hire me to take it again!"

"You have been over the road before?" queried Lee.

"Yes—on the passenger-train; but never on a hand-car. Let's get off as soon as we can."

To get from the hand-car to the passenger-train was not difficult, for the hand-car was pushing against the bumper of the rear platform of the train, and to step from one to the other was a very easy matter.

As Lee was riding in front, he got up to change his position. Just as he grasped the iron rail at the back of the coach two men stepped through the coach door and onto the rear platform.

"Back!" exclaimed an angry voice; "drop back onto that hand-car, or I'll kill ye!"

"Girou!" cried Lee.

"Yes, Girou!" snarled the man; "an' I'll give ye a pointer thet Girou means bizness! Ye played a bold game in chasin' arter this train down the mountain, when the wires had been cut, an' ye couldn't use the telegraph! But it ain't goin' to do ye any good! Git back, I tell ye, Maverick! I mean it!"

Lee looked toward the man who was with Girou.

He was an undersized individual, and had the earmarks of a rascal.

And in his hand he was carrying a canvas sack.

That this sack contained Mr. Hapgood's satchel Lee had not the slightest doubt.

"You're Jeff Girou, are you?" spoke up Mr. Hapgood, in a tense voice.

"Thet's what I call myself!"

"Well, what right have you got to order us to keep off this train?"

"No right; but I'm doin' it jest fer my own peace of mind! And you're goin' to stay off, too!"

Girou was smoking a cigar, and he rolled it into the corner of his mouth and peered at Lee through a fog of rapidly shifting smoke.

"What do you want us to do?" demanded Lee.

"Lay by. Put on the brakes and blockade yourself right here for an hour."

"You've got your nerve with you, Girou!"

"That ain't the only thing I've got with me!" and Girou drew from his pocket one of the bombs which he always carried about with him for his own protection, or for any other purpose that might suggest itself to his murderous mind.

"What have you got there?" demanded Hapgood sharply.

"A bomb. An' I'll give you fellers jest thirty seconds to put on the brakes an' lay by! Ye can't monkey with me!"

"Girou!" cried Lee; "do you know that in that canvas bag there is a stolen satchel——"

"Sure I know it!"

"That satchel was stolen from Mr. Hapgood here——"

"Hapgood!" cried Girou. "Is that man's name Hapgood?"

"Yes. That satchel was stolen from him, and it contains money and papers——"

"Keep the money, Girou, and throw us the papers!" cut in Hapgood.

"Not on yer life! I'd ruther keep the papers an' throw ye the money! That's the kind of a feller I am!"

"A little while ago," persisted Lee, "you were trying to help me get that contract."

"A little while ago, Maverick," leered Girou. "I didn't think I'd be able to get hold of it myself. You've made me trouble enough, for I had the devil's own time gittin'

away from that infernal sher'f! I made the break, but my pal got hung up!"

"If you hadn't stolen my money you wouldn't have got yourself into that boat."

"Waal, I'm not goin' to git myself inter another boat. Thet contract is wuth money, an' some'un's goin' ter pay fer it, an' pay heavy, too!"

"How much do you want for it?" queried Hapgood.

"I'll let Maverick know when I git a bid from Luke Larrimore. But I ain't got no more time ter waste in chinnin'. The conduc' may show up here at any minit, and we've got to cut loose!"

He made a sudden leap at young Maverick, and, catching him at a disadvantage, succeeded in wrenching his hands from the iron rail and in hurling him back into the hand-car.

Then, leaping over the brake-wheel, Girou took the cigar from his mouth and lighted the fuse attached to the bomb.

"Somethin's goin' ter happen inside o' thirty seconds!" said he; "an' Dynamite Jeff says so! This hyer is a thirty-second fuse, an', if you fellers don't stop thet car, the bomb'll drop in between ye, an' ye'll be blowed ter smithereens!"

"You wouldn't dare!" cried Hapgood.

A derisive laugh came from Girou.

Young Maverick was again on the forward seat, white and desperate.

"He means what he says!" said Lee. "The brake, Mr. Hapgood—the brake!"

Just as they laid their hands on the brakes something happened which Jeff Girou had not even remotely imagined.

Another of the sharp curves for which the narrow-gage road was noted was rounded suddenly.

Girou and his companion, intent on the business in hand, could pay no attention to the course the passenger-train was taking, and they were caught off their guard.

A mighty lurch flung them sideways.

Girou's companion, still hanging to the canvas bag, pitched headlong to the ground beside the track, and Girou, after making an ineffectual effort to catch hold of the brake-wheel, tumbled into the hand-car, the smoking bomb in his hand.

"Jump!" shouted Lee to Hapgood; "jump for your life!"

Over the side of the car the mining man went, and young Maverick would have followed suit, but Girou caught him by the foot.

"You stay with me, MacIntyre!" yelled Girou, in a frenzy. "If this hyer is the finish, we'll go up ter-gether!"

Summoning all his strength, Lee gave a furious kick and freed himself; then he leaped to the edge of the hand-car; then—

Before he could throw himself to the ground Girou's bomb exploded.

A lurid glare lighted the scene, followed instantly by a crash that echoed and reechoed among the stony hills.

Then, as Lee afterward explained, something "shut off the sunshine, and shut it off good and hard."

CHAPTER XV.

IMPORTANT EVENTS.

A hiatus followed the explosion of Dynamite Jeff's bomb. What occurred during the interim was all a blank to young Maverick, who opened his eyes two days later in a room which was entirely unfamiliar to him.

"Get the sack, Hapgood!" Lee cried, suddenly rising on his elbow. "Don't let that rascal get away with the sack!"

"Hooray—und hooray some more!" came a familiar voice. "Ach, how goot id sounds to hear you shpeak again! You peen vort' a dozen dead men yet, I bed you!"

Was it Chris Augenblick who was speaking?

Lee turned his eyes in the direction from which the speaker's voice had come and saw a vision of his Dutch comrade, resplendent in checked trousers, red vest, a cutaway coat, and loud necktie.

"That you, Chris?" asked Lee, rubbing his forehead in a bewildered way.

"Sure!" said Chris. "Big as life, und don'd you for-ged id!"

"Where did you come from?"

"From Placerville, py shinks! Got here dis mornin', aber nod by hand-car. Der passenger-drain vas goot enough for me, t'anks."

"I don't understand," muttered Lee.

"You'd be a vonder oof you dit!" Chris sat down by the head of the bed. "Don'd get oxcited mit your-seluf, Lee. Eferyding is all righdt, und a good deal pedder as you opect. Lay down und take id easy. You peen in pooty pad shape, der toctor says."

"What doctor?"

"V'y, der toctor vat Misder Hapgood send. He say you peen hurt infernally."

"What?"

"You peen hurt infernally."

"You mean internally," and Lee sank back on the bed, with a grin.

"Meppy dot's id."

"What's the matter with my arm?"

Lee held up his left arm, which was wrapped in splints and bandages.

"Busted, dot's all. But you got oudt oof dot smash-oop pooty goot, Lee, I tell you dot."

Lee was silent for several minutes. Finally he asked:

"Where am I, Chris?"

"In der pest room in der Spread Eagle Hodel, in der town oof Pimaville."

"When was I brought here?"

"On der drain yestertay morning. Der drain vas dree hours late."

"I was hurt in the explosion of Girou's bomb?"

"Dot's id."

"Was Hapgood hurt?"

"He vas scratched a leedle. You see, he chumped und got oudt oof der vay."

"Did he get the satchel?"

"You bed my life!"

"And was——"

"Don't say nodding; I know vat you vant."

Thereupon Chris took from the breast of his coat a long, greasy-looking wallet and handed it to Lee.

Young Maverick took the wallet in his right hand, and it is not to be denied that the hand trembled a little.

"Don't ged vorried," laughed Chris. "Eferyding iss all right."

In the wallet Lee found his contract, and also another paper, which proved to be an option given by old Bill Tetly to Luke Larrimore, and covering about all the land Tetly owned, aside from the hundred and sixty embraced in Lee's contract.

"How—how the nation could Grimes have secured this other paper?" muttered young Maverick.

"I know dot," said Chris. "You see, dere vas money pelonging to Grimes in dot pocketbook, Lee, and Misder Hapgood took it oop to Placerville yestertay afternoon, leafing you here in der care oof der toctor. Grimes iss in ped himseluf, you know dot, und ven Misder Hapgood took him der money Grimes told him all apoudt vat he dit. He shtole dot option from Larrimore, schust like he shtole dot contract from you, und he intended to make himseluf rich oudt oof dose doo papers. But der roadt-agents played hob mit Misder Grimes, I tell you dot."

"Ven Misder Hapgood got pack to Placerville he gomes rightd to der hotel, und he tells me vat a time you peen hafing oudt on der roadt, und how you got hurt. Den I wanted a pair oof vings so dot I could fly ofer here und be mit you, Lee; but nix; der vings wouldn't shprout, und I had to wait for der morning drain. Und Misder Hapgood he says to me, 'Misder Augenblick,' he say, schust like dot, 'Misder Augenblick, here iss dree hunnert tollars for you to gif to Lee Maferick,' he say, 'und twendy tollars for you to get some clodings vid. I got to go away to Cache d'Or,' he say, 'und id's in a pooty big hurry, I tell you. Id's on pitzness connected mit your friendt, und Maferick vill hear from me soon.'

"Ach, but dot Misder Hapgood iss a goot feller! I go me oudt und buy dese clodings, und den, in der morning, I shtart down here, und I haf been here efer since, waiting for you to ged your vits pack. You'll be schust as goot as efer in a mont', Lee, so dake id easy—dake id easy."

"A month!"

"Dot's vat der toctor says."

"I'll be up in half that time! I suppose that three hundred which Mr. Hapgood gave you for me is a loan?"

"Meppy."

"Of course it is! Mr. Hapgood intends for me to go back to Boliver as soon as I am able to travel, and get my three hundred from Dobson and send it to him. It's kind of Hapgood, and this money will help us out in good shape."

"Money is a goot ding to haf in your clothes," sighed Chris. "A feller vat nefer has any knows dot."

"And what of Girou?"

"Deadt as a door-nail. He vas kilt by his own bomb, aber nod right away. He lifed for a gouple oof hours or so, und had a lot to say to Misder Hapgood. I t'ink id iss vat he said dot sent Misder Hapgood to Cache d'Or. Lee, you know vat I t'ink?"

"No."

"Vell, py shinks, I t'ink you don'd peen goin' to be a Maferick any more! You're goin' to findt oudt who you are, und vere you come from, und vere you pelong, und pooty quick, too."

"I know where I belong," answered Lee. "I belong in Texas, just as quick as I can get back there."

"Sure; und I pelong mit you. Girou und you vas brought in on der drain afder der plow-ooop. You see, der drainmen heardt der oxblosion, und shtopped der cars und waited. So you vas took on und brought ofer in dis vay."

"What became of the road-agent—the man who had the satchel in the canvas bag?"

"You can search me! He got away, und he vas so shcared dot he dropped der pag und forgot to pick id oop. Girou vas planted dis morning, und Misder Hapgood shtood der expense."

"Girou gone!" muttered Lee. "It's hard for me to realize that I'm never more to be bothered by him. I never could understand him."

"Meppy you will know more ven you hear from Misder Hapgood."

"Perhaps."

Lee wondered what Girou could have told Mr. Hapgood to send him off post-haste to Cache d'Or, and possibly east or west by railroad from that point.

He recalled how, when Jeff Girou's name was mentioned by Chris at Placerville, Hapgood had acted as though Girou was not unknown to him; and Lee also recalled how, during his colloquy with Girou, just before the blow-up, Girou had acted as though Hapgood was not a stranger, by name at least.

Every day young Maverick hoped that he should hear something from Hapgood, but two weeks passed without bringing any word; and in those two weeks he felt as though he could return to Texas and finish his business with Bill Tetly.

The winding up of that deal for the hundred and sixty acres of land ought not to be deferred, for there was no telling what Luke Larrimore was about, nor what underhand schemes he and Scapps might attempt to play.

So Lee, his left arm still bandaged and suspended from his neck by a sling, took train for Texas, accompanied by his faithful pal, Chris, and one morning they alighted in Boliver.

As they walked from the railroad-station to the hotel they encountered Dobson, and Dobson acted as though he were looking at a ghost as he stared at the face of young Maverick.

"Howdy, old man," said the smiling Lee, extending his hand.

"I—I thought you were dead, Maverick!" gasped the sheriff. "There was a telegram from Arizona printed in the Boliver paper two weeks ago stating that you had been killed in a railroad collision, or something."

"It was a fake," said Lee.

"And I'm glad it was!" declared the sheriff heartily, and gave young Maverick's hand a cordial shake.

He also welcomed Chris.

"I'm gladder to see you now as I vas der last time ven ve met," said Chris.

"That's all past and gone," said Dobson. "You hadn't ought to lay up any hard feelings, Augenblick. I was only trying to do my duty."

"Oh, Maferick und Gompany vas on dop, und ve don'd lay oop hardt feelings against any vone. Hey, Lee?"

"Certainly not," said Lee.

"And that reminds me," remarked Dobson. "I've got three hundred of your money over at my office, Maverick."

"Well, let it stay there for awhile, Dobson," answered Lee; "I've got too much to do this morning to bother with it. You let Girou get away from you, eh?"

"Couldn't help myself. Scapps and that other fellow, Quirk, roughed things up, and in the excitement Girou gave me the slip."

"Scapps and Larrimore and Quirk are in the jail here?"

"They were in jail, but they're not now."

"Why, I told you I'd be back and settle with them!"

"When the news of your death was printed in the paper we gave you up, and, of course, there was no ground for us to hold Scapps and Larrimore any longer, so we let them go. Quirk couldn't be held, anyway. The three hundred dollars were not found on him, you know, and——"

"Where are Larrimore and Scapps?"

"Haven't you heard?"

"I haven't heard a thing from this section since I left here."

"Why, they've struck oil over on Bill Tetly's land, and there's the biggest kind of excitement all over Texas. In less than a week Boliver will be such a big place you won't know it."

Lee gasped.

As young Maverick heard from Sheriff Dobson's own lips that Larrimore and Scapps had taken possession of his claim on Bill Tetly's land, and had struck the wealth of oil which he had been working for so long, he was too astonished at first to utter a word.

He just stared at the sheriff, with a terrible feeling of disappointment swelling up in his breast.

Then came the reaction, and Lee's face set like stone.

"Come, Chris," he muttered grimly. "There's work ahead of us."

They hurried away from the astonished sheriff, ate a hasty breakfast at the hotel, and then went over to the livery-stable, where Lee ordered his horse and another put to a buckboard.

At sight of young Maverick the keeper of the stable also acted as though he had seen a ghost.

"It will be impossible for me to hitch up your bronco, Mr. Maverick," said the proprietor of the barn, after a time.

"Why so?"

"Well, I thought you were dead—everybody in town thought so—and I had a good chance to sell your horse—so—so—well, I sold it."

"Oh, you did!" exclaimed Lee sharply. "How much did you get for it?"

"A hundred. Here it is."

The keeper of the barn took a hundred dollars in gold from his pocket and handed it to Lee.

"Who bought the horse?" Lee asked, taking the money.

"Luke Larrimore."

The boy's brow darkened.

"Well," he went on, "give us a good, lively team, and hurry up."

The team and buckboard were made ready, and Lee and Chris got on the front seat.

"Vat you got two seats for?" asked Chris.

"There's a man going with us."

"Who is dot?"

"A notary public."

"Vat vill he do?"

"He will execute some legal papers just as soon as we reach Bill Tetly's."

In a few minutes young Maverick had picked up the notary, and, at the boy's request, that official brought with him his seal and two blank deeds.

"Now for the last move in the game," muttered young Maverick, as he headed the team along the road to Tetly's and started them off at a sharp clip.

"We'll see dot oil-vell vat Larrimore has struck," muttered Chris.

"And we'll see Kitty," said Lee, and he said it in such a tone of voice that Chris looked at him with a broad grin and a sly wink.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Lee.

"Oh, nodding, nodding," smirked Chris. "Aber I ain'd so big a fool as I look."

"You couldn't be," laughed Lee, and Chris didn't know whether to get mad or not.

CHAPTER XVI.

FOILING A VILLAIN.

The trail followed by Lee led past the quarter-section of land covered by his contract, and when the boys sighted the hundred and sixty a startled exclamation broke from each of them.

At the place where Abner Grimes had been digging the well there was now erected an immense derrick, fully eighty feet in height; and in the very center of this derrick, and spouting out high over the top, was a fountain of oil, its upper part spreading out into a feathery plume that sparkled in the sunshine.

At the foot of the derrick a large force of men were working.

"They struck oil yesterday," explained the notary, "and are doing their utmost to save the overflow. The discovery of oil means a great future for this country. Larrimore has already been offered a hundred thousand dollars for his well, for he has found luminant oil of the highest grade."

It would be difficult to describe Lee's feelings as he looked at the spouting well, running hundreds of barrels a day, and realized what that well had cost him. He had won it literally at the peril of his life.

He reined up his horses near the derrick and inquired of one of the workmen where he might find Luke Larrimore.

"He's over at Bill Tetly's," said the laborer, and Lee whipped away in that direction.

Halting the horses at the rear of the house, Lee gave the lines to Chris, jumped down, and started for the kitchen door, as he had so often done before, when coming to see Kitty.

He remembered the time when he called on Kitty last, and he was a little surprised to hear Larrimore's voice, and Kitty's, in conversation in the kitchen, just as he had heard them the other time.

But Bill Tetly was also in the kitchen now, and so was his wife, as Lee quickly discovered.

A little curious, the youth drew close and stood listening, wondering what villainy Larrimore could now be up to.

"Have you no mercy on us, Luke Larrimore?" came the trembling voice of Mrs. Tetly.

A low laugh came from the confidence man.

"I think I am having mercy on you. I'm a rich man

now, and I'm offering to divide my wealth with you and old Bill, and with Miss Kitty."

"I don't want your money!" cried the voice of Kitty, in no uncertain tones.

"You don't, eh? You'd ruin your aunt and your uncle just to keep clear of me, would you? I'd make you a good husband; I'd——"

"I will not listen to you!"

"Then I'll take your uncle's land. I've got the options, and he'll have to sell the property to me."

"Oh, I was a fool, a fool!" wailed old Bill. "I should have listened when young Maverick warned me against you! He was a friend of mine, and I treated him as though he was a thief and a villain. But you were the thief and the villain, Larrimore! You got those options from me by fraud——"

"It makes no difference how I got them," came the oily tones of Larrimore; "I have them, and that's enough. If Miss Shane will consent to marry me, I will give you a half-interest in those options, Tetly——"

"A half-interest in my own land!" exclaimed old Bill.

"A half-loaf is better than no bread. Take it, or leave it."

"I will never force my niece into marrying such a rogue as you are!" cried old Bill furiously. "You have no right to that hundred and sixty, and that oil-well——"

"Now that young Maverick is dead, who has a better right? I hold a contract from you, subject only to the contract you gave Maverick. With Maverick out of the way, the land is mine!"

Lee had heard enough, and more than enough.

Very quietly he stepped into the kitchen and stood in the midst of the four assembled there.

"Yes, but Maverick isn't out of the way! You have overreached yourself, Luke Larrimore. I am much obliged to you for striking oil and building that derrick for me."

For an instant there was the deepest silence in the kitchen, Mr. and Mrs. Tetly, and Kitty, and Larrimore staring at the youth as at one returned from the grave.

Kitty was very pale, and her eyes were red with weeping; but suddenly the look of astonishment left her face and a look of joy took its place.

"It's Lee!" she cried; "it's Lee! He wasn't killed at all! He has come back again!"

And she sprang toward young Maverick.

"Yes," said Lee softly, throwing his arm about her and giving her a swift kiss; "I have come back to claim my own and to see that justice is done your uncle!"

A baffled oath fell from the lips of Larrimore, and he drew to one side, glaring fiercely at Lee, while Mr. and Mrs. Tetly came up to the youth to shake his hand and congratulate him on his return.

"I've done you a wrong, boy," cried old Bill, "but that man"—he turned and pointed a finger at Larrimore—"worked upon me and caused me to do what I did."

"It's true, Mr. Maverick," chimed in Mrs. Tetly; "but for Larrimore William would never have treated you as he did."

"Lee knows that," said the happy Kitty.

"Sure," answered Lee.

"This is all very nice, and very pretty," spoke up Larrimore; "Maverick may, perhaps, get his oil-well and his hundred and sixty, but you can't beat me out of the rest of it."

"Rats!" exclaimed Lee disgustedly.

"You can't cut any ice by that kind of talk," said Larrimore. "Those options are worth something, and don't you forget it."

"You haven't got any options, Larrimore, and you know it."

"Ask old Bill."

"I gave him an option on all the land I hold," acknowledged Tetly. "He secured the paper by fraud, but lawyers have told me that I cannot help myself."

"I repeat, Mr. Tetly," said Lee, "that man has not got the option on your land. I have it, and here it is."

Young Maverick took the paper from his pocket, unfolded it, and held it up for them all to see.

A gasp escaped old Bill.

"Where did you get it?" he demanded. "Where——"

Just then, with a snarl of fury, Larrimore darted forward to catch the paper out of Lee's hand.

Kitty, however, snatched it and sprang to the other side of the room with it, and Lee, doubling his fist, gave Larrimore a tap under the ear that sent him reeling backward.

"Hand that paper to your uncle, Kitty," said Lee. "Tear it up, Mr. Tetly. With that out of the way, your land is all your own."

Bill Tetly took the paper, glanced it over to make sure that it was really the one he had given Larrimore, and then stepped to the kitchen stove and stuffed it into the fire.

Larrimore swore like a pirate and ran toward the door, but Lee stepped in front of him.

"Just a moment," said Lee. "You bought my horse from the keeper of the livery-stable in Boliver. The liveryman had no right to sell the horse, and I could take the animal away from you without paying you a cent. That's not the way I do business, however. Here's the hundred you paid for the horse. Take it and get out. If I find you hanging around this part of the country after to-day, you'll go to the calaboose, and will be brought to trial for something which will land you in the pen. Now, then, scatter!"

Lee flung the gold pieces at the villain's feet. For a second it seemed as though he might refuse to take them, but finally he bent down, gathered them up, and plunged out of the house.

Young Maverick stepped through the door after him.

"See that he doesn't take my horse, Chris," shouted Lee.

"You bed my life!" whooped Chris. "I'll make him look like a gouple oof cents oof he tries dot."

"This is too good to be true, too good to be true," murmured old Bill, grabbing Lee by both hands. "You've saved the day for me, Maverick, and if I had my just deserts you wouldn't have turned over your hand to help me."

"That's not Lee Maverick's way," put in Kitty, with a fond look at the youth. "Come into the sitting-room, Lee, and tell us everything that's happened to you; and, above all, tell us how that report got out that you had been killed in a railroad collision."

Lee yielded to the request of the girl, and told everything; and, after the story was finished, the notary was called in and executed two deeds—one to Lee, from Mr. and Mrs. Tetly, and the other to Chris, from Lee.

The first deed called for the entire hundred and sixty. Old Bill didn't want to take any money, but Lee in-

sisted. After paying two hundred dollars, a small sum was still left to be paid, but this was taken care of by a note given by young Maverick.

The deed to Chris called for an undivided third interest in the oil-land owned by Lee.

When told of his good fortune, the Dutch boy could scarcely believe his ears. He was rich, richer than he had ever dreamed he should be.

He protested that he was not entitled to what Lee had given him, but Lee would not have it any other way, and Chris threw his arms around Lee and tramped on his feet, and blubbered, just as he always did when his emotions got the best of him.

And after all was said and done, and Lee had requested Bill to inform the workmen at the oil-well that the ownership of the property had been changed, the boys and the notary went back to town to put their deeds on record.

They left a happy household behind them at the Tetly ranch, and old Bill and his wife and Kitty stood out in front and waved them a farewell, and Kitty, by a sudden impulse, put her fingers to her red lips and threw a kiss.

Chris clapped his hands together.

"I caught it!" cried the Dutch boy; "dot's mine, by shinks!"

"Think so if you want to," laughed Lee; "but you're fooled, all the same."

CHAPTER XVII.

CONCLUSION.

A surprise awaited Lee and Chris after they had put up their horses and buckboard and had returned to the hotel.

On the veranda in front of the hotel they saw no less a person than Mr. Hapgood, and with the mining man there was a well-dressed gentleman with a white mustache, who seemed to be somewhat nervous.

When Lee and Chris hove into sight they recognized Hapgood, and then saw him lean over and whisper to his companion.

The gentleman with the white mustache gave a start, got hastily to his feet, and bent a steady gaze on young Maverick.

There was something about that look which affected young Maverick strangely; it was impossible to define the feeling which suddenly took possession of him. He felt that something was coming—something of the utmost importance which he had waited years to hear; yet he hardly knew what it was.

Mr. Hapgood ran down the veranda steps and caught Lee by the hand.

"I have just come on from Pimaville," said he, "and brought my old friend, MacIntyre, with me. You got out of Pimaville on the train just ahead of us, so we pushed on here, and got in but little more than an hour ago." Hapgood gave his hand to Chris, and then led Lee up the steps. "MacIntyre," he went on, "this is Lee Maverick, the young man of whom I was telling you, and whom I have brought you such a long distance to see. This other young man is Maverick's friend, Chris Augenblick."

Mr. MacIntyre gave Lee's hand a long pressure and continued to look into his face as though studying it line by line.

"Will you sit down, Maverick?" he asked. "I wish to talk with you."

Lee and Chris sat down on the top step of the veranda, and the other two resumed their chairs.

"You call yourself Maverick," said Mr. MacIntyre, "Lee Maverick. May I ask you if that is your correct name?"

"No, sir," answered Lee; "but it is the only name I know anything about. I fitted it to these initials."

He parted the bandages that swathed his left arm and showed the tattoo-marks.

As he had studied the youth's face, so Mr. MacIntyre now studied the two letters, then quietly released Lee's arm and sank back in his chair.

"I would like to know all that you know respecting yourself," proceeded Mr. MacIntyre. "Please tell me everything, and do not leave out the slightest detail. It is not an idle curiosity which prompts me to make this request, and I shall hope to prove that to you before we are through."

It took Lee something like an hour to relate his knowledge of himself to the satisfaction of Mr. MacIntyre. When he had finished, the other leaned toward Mr. Hapgood and whispered something, and then Mr. MacIntyre said, again leaning back in his chair:

"You never had the remotest idea as to who your people were?"

"Never."

"Then let me relate something for your benefit, my lad. A dozen years ago a man named Horace MacIntyre lived in California. He was a mining man, very wealthy, a widower, and he had one son, named Lawrence.

"Like all successful men, Horace MacIntyre had enemies, and there were two who were particularly vengeful toward him. One of these was a rival mine-owner named Harrigan, and the other was a blaster in MacIntyre's employ.

"The blaster, by a criminal neglect of duty, had caused a premature explosion, and had come within a hair's breadth of killing a dozen men. Horace MacIntyre had the blaster arrested, tried, and imprisoned in the penitentiary for a year. This man swore he would be even with MacIntyre, and would set about getting even the very day he got out of prison.

"Harrigan, the rival mine-owner, had attempted to do a little sharp practise, and Horace MacIntyre had called him to account. He also vowed that he would get even with MacIntyre, and simply bided his time.

"When the doors of the penitentiary opened and allowed the blaster to go free, Harrigan secured his services in putting into effect a scheme of vengeance which was as effective as it was fiendish. Young Larry, MacIntyre's only child, was stolen, and from the hour he disappeared the mystery of his whereabouts was as complete as that surrounding the abduction of young Ross—a case which every one in the country still remembers.

"It was a heavy blow for Horace MacIntyre, and he never got over it. He spent thousands of dollars in the attempt to locate his son, hired detectives by the dozen, and had the weary search continued year after year, but without avail.

"There was one mark about the boy by which he could be known, and that mark, of course, would be borne out by a family resemblance. The mark in question consisted of the initials 'L. M.'—Lawrence MacIntyre—tattooed on his left arm.

"The tattooing was done by a brother of MacIntyre's who sailed a whaling-vessel out of San Francisco. It was against Horace MacIntyre's wishes—in fact, Horace MacIntyre did not know when the tattooing was done, as this seafaring brother did the work himself while on a visit to the MacIntyre mines. But that tattoo-mark was something on which Horace MacIntyre pinned his faith in the ultimate finding of his boy, and lived to thank his brother for doing that which he had condemned."

A silence followed.

"That's about all," Mr. MacIntyre finally resumed. "From the day young Larry disappeared until the present his fate has been sealed. At this late hour, however, fortune has been kind. A friend of MacIntyre's, named Hapgood, knew all about the case; and when Hapgood, not long since, came upon a young man named Maverick, and heard that Maverick had dealings with a man named Jeff Girou, and when Hapgood got from Girou a dying confession, suspicions were more than proved, and Hapgood posted away to bring one of the parties who was more nearly interested to the scene."

Again Mr. MacIntyre became silent.

"Am I Larry MacIntyre?" asked Lee, almost in a whisper, rising to his feet.

"Without a doubt."

"And the blaster was——"

"Dynamite Jeff."

"And you—you are Horace MacIntyre, my father?"

Young Maverick started forward, his heart thumping wildly, his hand outstretched.

Mr. MacIntyre took the extended hand, but shook his head sadly.

"No, Larry. Horace MacIntyre is dead. I am his brother, Edgeworth, the master of the whaling-ship. But I have long since given up the sea and have been managing your father's estate—the estate which now belongs to you."

Young Maverick's head was in a whirl. Again he seated himself on the step beside Chris and bowed his face in his hands for a second.

"And what did Girou say?" he asked, suddenly directing his gaze at Hapgood.

"He made a full confession," said the mining man; "I have it down in black and white and duly sworn to. When you were stolen, Harrigan gave Girou money to take you East. In New York you were given over to the care of a woman known to Girou, and when the woman died, and money for your keeping stopped coming from Harrigan, you were compelled to shift for yourself."

"But Girou watched you and never allowed you to get out of his sight, if he could help it. To the last, Dynamite Jeff was determined that he would kill you before he ever allowed any of your friends to get on your track. He knew of me, and when he heard my name, just before that explosion, he thought perhaps that I had some knowledge of who you were, and hence his desperate attempt to make way with you, as well as with himself."

"Girou followed you to Texas. He knew you were a hustler and bound to succeed, and he wanted to feather his nest out of your earnings. He found out about your oil-land and about the stolen contract, and, with his companion, Quirk, laid low in that robber's roost on the river."

"Up to a time, he wanted you to secure possession of that contract, but changed his plans when he escaped from Dobson, the sheriff, and followed Abner Grimes from Twin Buttes to Cache d'Or, just as you and your friend Chris had done."

"Dynamite Jeff was not much behind you in reaching Cache d'Or, Larry." Hapgood smiled a little as he spoke the new name which, as yet, sounded strangely in young Maverick's ears. "And fortune so willed it that Girou should meet up with the road-agent who had escaped with the satchel. This robber, as Girou told me in his confession, was on the point of delivering himself up to Bagsby and his men when Girou met him. Dynamite Jeff recognized the highwayman as an old acquaintance—Jeff Girou had an extended acquaintance among all the worst class of people—and he prevailed on the outlaw to keep the satchel and contents, and assured him that they would make a big thing out of the contract and the option. That Girou did not succeed in this plan, after cutting the telegraph-wires and taking passage down the mountain on the passenger-train, is due to your plucky ride on the hand-car——"

"You had a hand in that, Mr. Hapgood," cut in Lee. "If you had not helped me, I could not have succeeded."

"In helping you I was also helping myself. I had some options in that satchel, if you will remember, and Dynamite Jeff was planning to sell them to me at a good round figure. You are in luck, Larry, in luck all around. You know who you are and where you came from; you have tumbled into a fortune in California, and have, by your own pluck and energy, made a fortune for yourself right here in Texas."

"Hooray!" cried Chris, throwing up his hat. "Id takes der whole pakry, und no mishdake! You haf branded a Maferick, Misder Hapgood! I vas so habby I can't see shtrait!"

"I haven't exactly been branded, Chris," said Lee, "but I have learned what that brand, which I have carried so long, stands for."

"Und id's Larry—Larry MacIndyre! Lee Maferick vas kilt, afder all!"

"And in that railroad collision," smiled Mr. Hapgood, "just as the papers put it."

* * * * *

Thus it came about that Lee Maverick was suddenly transformed into Larry MacIntyre—young Mr. MacIntyre, with an "oil-gusher" in Texas and an independent estate in California.

He was wealthy—in fact, had "money to burn, by shinks!" as Chris averred, although he did not set fire to any of it—and his good fortune had all come to him through that perilous pursuit for his contract.

Had the contract not been stolen by Grimes, Lee would never have followed Grimes to Cache d'Or and the gold country, would never have been mixed up in that stage-coach robbery, would never have met Mr. Hapgood, would never have had that wild ride down the mountain, and so on, all of which had led to his recovery of the stolen contract and the revelation of his own identity.

Truly fate is a wonderful force in the affairs of men! Larrimore had tried to wrest the oil-land out of Larry MacIntyre's hands and had failed ignominiously.

With Larry's threat of legal proceedings hanging over him, he did not remain in Texas, but took flight to

safer parts, and, mayhap, is pursuing a career of villainy to this day, if he has not already paid the penalty for his many crimes.

Scapps, the cattleman, also took to the wilderness, using the fleetest horse he could find at the ranch.

Abner Grimes, after recovering from the shot which brought him to the doors of death, concluded that he did not care to return to Texas, and, profiting by his experience with Larry's contract, settled down in the gold country and led the life of a miner.

Quirk, Girou's hobo friend and confederate, was never heard of after leaving the Boliver jail.

Larry's discovery of oil brought such a stampede of speculators to that part of Texas that Larry and Chris, on the advice of Edgeworth MacIntyre, sold out their holdings for a large sum, and both boys found themselves with more money than they knew very well what to do with.

They went to California with Mr. MacIntyre, and Chris bought a ranch near Larry's and bossed things to his heart's content.

In time there was a Mrs. Augenblick, and she bossed Chris—but that's another story.

From time to time Larry MacIntyre made visits to Texas, and on his last trip to the Lone Star State, when he was in the early twenties, he took the attraction

that had given rise to his periodical visits back to California with him.

This attraction, of course, was Kitty Shane.

Mr. and Mrs. Tetly became very wealthy out of the land they owned, and which, prior to the discovery of oil, had been almost worthless.

Old Bill had a bad attack of conscience every time he thought of the way he had treated Larry; but he did the best he could to make things right.

He gave up Kitty willingly, and the wedding-present that went with his niece was the very costliest silver-service that could be purchased in all New York.

It was a special design, manufactured to order, and unique in its way.

There was a "broadhorn" on ever piece, and every broadhorn was branded with the letters "L. M."

THE END.

No. 204 of BRAVE AND BOLD will contain a clever detective story of the kind that keeps one awake until the last word has been read, and possibly still later if you chance to be of a nervous disposition. It is entitled "Tom, the Mystery Boy; or, Trailed by a Secret Shadow," and was written by the favorite author, Robert Reid.

ABOUT THE EARLY NUMBERS OF THE

TIP TOP WEEKLY

WE receive hundreds of letters every week from readers asking if we can supply the early numbers of Tip Top containing Frank's adventures. In every case we are obliged to reply that numbers 1 to 300 are entirely out of print. We would like to call the attention of our readers to the fact that the Frank Merriwell Stories now being published in book form in the Medal Library are inclusive of these early numbers. The first book to appear was No. 150 entitled "Frank Merriwell's Schooldays." We give herewith a complete list of all stories that have been published in book form up to the time of writing. We will be glad to send a fine colored catalogue of the Medal Library which is just filled with good things for boys, upon receipt of a one-cent stamp to cover postage.

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- No.
- 150—Frank Merriwell's Schooldays.
- 167—Frank Merriwell's Chums.
- 178—Frank Merriwell's Foes.
- 184—Frank Merriwell's Trip West.
- 189—Frank Merriwell Down South.
- 193—Frank Merriwell's Bravery.
- 197—Frank Merriwell's Hunting Tour.
- 201—Frank Merriwell in Europe.
- 205—Frank Merriwell at Yale.
- 209—Frank Merriwell's Sports Afield.
- 213—Frank Merriwell's Races.
- 217—Frank Merriwell's Bicycle Tour.
- 225—Frank Merriwell's Courage.
- 229—Frank Merriwell's Daring.
- 233—Frank Merriwell's Athletes.
- 237—Frank Merriwell's Skill.
- 240—Frank Merriwell's Champions.
- 244—Frank Merriwell's Return to Yale.
- 247—Frank Merriwell's Secret.
- 251—Frank Merriwell's Danger.
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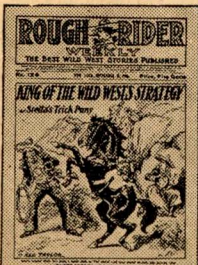
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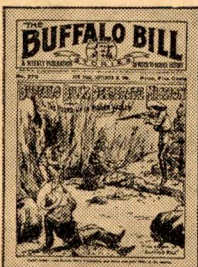
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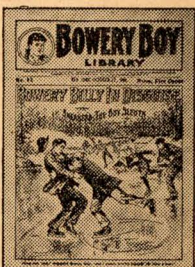
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